

CHAPTER THREE

Baron Loras Fralen toyed with the glass of brandy in his hand, twirling the brown liquor in a slow circle. His chair sat close to the roaring fireplace, and the pages of a thick tome laid open his lap, unturned for nearly an hour.

His steely grey eyes stared absently at the soaring eagle emblem of the late Lord Caron Pinixer embroidered in the rug at his feet. With winter fast approaching the Baron was loath to remove anything that kept the incessant cold at bay – even the coat of arms of his conquered enemy. The walls exuded cold, so overwhelmingly that the hunks of granite could have been ice carved from the mountain peaks. Embroidered window-coverings as thick as grain sacks failed to quell the chill breezes that penetrated every room. The smoke-darkened stone walls seemed to soak up the torch light, leaving the hallways shadowy and bleak. Each murky room looked like the last – frigid, grim and uninviting. Everything about this castle reminded the Baron of a tomb.

He should have sent for his own possessions in the summer, but he had not expected to remain here long enough to need them. Since the day he conquered the keep he had hoped to return home to Kosan in the arid, southern region of Thrall. He had not seen his daughter Elyce in over a year, an eternity to a ten-year old. She had almost given up begging for his return in her letters. He longed to return to the warmth and sunshine, but King Coriun had ordered him to remain.

Now the king had ordered his emissary here as well, and matters were worse. He closed the book and decided to find Donal, his second in command. He donned a heavy fur-lined cloak and left his quarters, moving briskly down frigid stone hallways dancing with shadows from sputtering torches. Even though he had demanded the servants heat the halls with twice the usual braziers, he could still see his breath misting out into the air. And the winter had barely begun. Why had the Pinixers ever chosen to live here?

The Baron made his way down several flights of the central staircase. At each landing, he nodded curtly to the bored guards, who quickly snapped to attention. In the great hall, servants cleaned up dinner from the rough wooden tables. Bright embers glowed in the eight huge fireplaces that ringed the room, outlining the carved stone griffins on the mantles in a sinister orange hue. The dim light could not reach the soaring timbers of the ceiling, and the dark expanse yawned above him like a starless night.

The Baron pulled out his fur-lined gloves and approached the guards at the massive iron-bound courtyard doors. “Have you seen Captain Donal?” he asked them.

“Yes, m’lord,” one of the guards offered with a salute. “He went up on the wall to visit with the men on watch, not more than a few moments ago. You should catch him at the west station.”

At a motion from the Baron, the two men hustled to open the massive doors, which creaked loudly from the strain. “Get some oil to those doors and have the servants deliver watered wine to the sitting room,” the Baron commanded. The frigid air outside enveloped him like a smothering blanket. He hurried across the icy cobblestones of the inner courtyard, bending his head against the stiff wind that blew flurries of light snow across the darkened yard.

The silhouettes of guards huddled around their firepots dotted the stone wall nearly thirty feet above. The Baron put his gloved hands on the thick metal rungs of the ladder and began to climb. He hoped to find Donal quickly. He did not fancy the idea of making a complete round of the walls in the icy stiffness of the winds tonight.

At the top of the ladder, he saw several men gathered around a firepot looking over the western gates. Coarse sand had been scattered on the walkway to cut down on the slipperiness of the ice that coated the smooth stone at night, and he treaded his way carefully to the men.

“—then I could see that huge bastard Dragis not fifty feet away from me!” the familiar voice of his captain cried, pointing off into the darkness. “And I thought: this time I will send you to your rightful place in hell beside your father and brothers!”

“Captain Donal,” the Baron interrupted. “Save the stories for later. We must talk.”

Donal stopped abruptly and turned around, his arms still outstretched. The other three men, their faces hidden by thick fur capes, snapped to attention at the unexpected appearance of their Baron.

“Stories?” Donal exclaimed, his white teeth gleaming through a thick blond mustache and beard. “I was telling the men of my attempt to engage our friend Dragis the Giant in battle this morning! But, as usual, he ran from me.”

The Baron shook his head. His second officer’s excitement – no, love – for battle and the yarns it spurred were legendary. Donal had joined Fralen’s command just before the late King Tromin had ordered a campaign against the goblin hordes seven years ago. The young warrior swiftly made a name for himself with his sword and his audacious behavior. When Fralen decided to take a small group of warriors and scale the walls of Pinixer castle in the early morning hours, Donal was one of the first men Fralen chose to accompany him. They were finally spotted here on this catwalk, and it was Donal who won control of the western portcullis and opened it for the main force. After Fralen’s former captain and close friend Zuman was killed during the subsequent fight for the Lord Caron’s tower, there was little doubt which of the remaining officers deserved the post.

“I want to speak to you regarding the battle this morning,” Fralen said. “And the mission.”

Donal nodded grimly and followed him down the ladder. As they entered the keep, the Baron noted with satisfaction that a guard was already applying oil to the hinges of the great doors. The two men turned into a small oak-paneled room that bordered the great hall. The Baron removed his cloak from his broad shoulders and hung it on a wall peg. A mirror hung over the long fireplace running the length of one wall, and he glanced at the grey hair streaking through his close-shaven temples. Wrinkles touched the corners of his eyes, a reminder of how

long he had been away from home. He appraised his newly grown mustache on his upper lip and saw it was also speckled grey. He would likely have his servant shave it off in the morning.

Donal finished adding several logs to the fire and Fralen motioned for him to take a seat.

“I heard that Lord Chagaris has arrived,” Donal commented. A bottle of the watered wine was warming over a candle on a small table, and Donal filled two mugs. “Are you finally to be granted leave to return home?”

The Baron, standing in front of the growing fire and enjoying the warmth soaking into his body, shook his head. “You have not earned your first command, if that is what you ask. There was no mention of a leave.” He turned and lowered himself into a seat, taking a proffered mug from Donal.

Donal extended his booted feet towards the blazing fire. “Did Lord Charagis ask about the battle?”

“Of course.”

“And what did he say?”

“First he asked if we had picked men for this mission who matched the ‘specifications’ in his orders. I told him we had followed his instructions to letter, though assigning the dimmest men in our command to such a dangerous mission made even less sense than the vague orders they were given. He didn’t seem to appreciate my opinions on the matter.”

Donal pulled at the blond beard that surrounded his wide mouth. “We lost a great many men today simply to slip three of our own into Travis disguised amongst their troops. Do you honestly believe they are capable of continuing whatever ruse the emissary has in mind? We have no way of getting orders or messages to them.”

The Baron rubbed his brow with his hand, “I asked Chagaris about his reasoning for choosing such men, but he did not give me an answer. I expect we will learn eventually. Once he heard that we believed three of the six chosen men had been able to infiltrate the Griffins, he was too thrilled to pay me much attention. He said we had been fantastically successful.”

“What is the King’s emissary like?” Donal asked. Fralen heard the unspoken question: is he the monster everyone claims? In the two years since King Coriun’s ascension to the throne, Lord Chagaris had seen his influence expand rapidly. He was a member of the Order, a society of learned men dedicated to serving the nobility of Thrall, but Chagaris was despised by the populace for the numerous proclamations he made in the name of the King. He had confiscated lands and livestock, increased levies for the army and even taxed couples who produced too few children. It was by Chagaris’ direct orders that Fralen had embarked on the foolhardy skirmish with the Golden Tide this morning, a battle that had not gone well.

The Baron took a drink from the mug. The diluted wine was a harsh swallow after his exceptional brandy, and he forced down the drink before he answered. “He was not what I expected.”

At that moment there was a knock at the door and the guard outside called out, “Baron, Lord Chagaris would speak with you immediately.”

Damn, the Baron thought. “Of course, let him in.”

A diminutive bald man in fine green robes trimmed with red velvet swept into the room, his rotund face breaking into a delighted grin as he rambled forward. He held out his right hand, while in the left he gripped an iron staff the length of a walking cane capped with a carved head of a raptor. The Baron held out his own hand, which the robed man cupped with his soft, chubby fingers and shook vigorously, looking up into the Baron’s eyes and exclaiming, “Baron Fralen,

I'm so glad I found you!" Chagaris continued shaking the Baron's hand for an unpleasantly long time, finally giving it a squeeze before he let go.

"Lord Chagaris," Fralen said. "This is Captain Donal, my second-in-command. He personally helped capture this castle – opening the portcullis himself."

Donal stepped forward and Chagaris shook his hand as well. "May I join you?" Chagaris asked.

"As you wish," the Baron replied, politely but not warmly, taking his own seat. Chagaris plopped down heavily into Donal's chair with a sigh, resting the cane across his knees.

"Would you like some wine?" Fralen asked.

"Oh, no, no, no," Chagaris insisted, smiling broadly and waving a plump hand in dismissal. The Baron relaxed slightly, hoping that the visit would be brief, but his hopes were quickly dashed. "You know, how silly would it be to give up an opportunity to share a drink and some tales with our esteemed eastern commander and his captain? I will take you up on your kind offer. I have heard that Lord Pinixer kept a fine cellar."

Fralen went to pour Chagaris a drink as Donal asked, "Emissary, was your trip comfortable? The bird carrying word of your visit arrived only this morning." Fralen and Donal both knew the trip east through the mountain passes required nearly three weeks – yet the bird had only been sent yesterday. As if Chagaris had wanted to surprise them.

"I did send a bird from Charlhom almost a turn of the moon ago but it must have fallen to some misfortune – perhaps an eagle – I have seen many of them on my journey." Turning to Fralen, Chagaris asked, "An eagle was Lord Pinixer's sigil, was it not?" As Fralen nodded Chagaris chuckled, "Perhaps Lord Caron interferes with us beyond his grave, reincarnated as his favorite bird!" Fralen failed to find the humor in the remark. "Regardless, I am glad I thought to send the second bird ahead yesterday – how rude it would have been of me and my retinue to show up on your doorstep without any warning at all!"

The Baron said nothing and simply handed Chagaris the mug of wine.

"The cold here is frightful," Chagaris continued. "Not like your southern homeland, Loras. I was just through that region, three turns of the moon ago. When I left Baron Redwin's camp outside Kaleb it was so hot and humid – within moments of bathing I was soaked through with sweat again. If I remember correctly, your lands were doing very well. The homes there were among the nicest in the realm, although Radic would change that if they could."

"I am sure that our southern armies will not let that happen," Fralen replied. Puzzled, he asked, "You said you left Baron Redwin's camp? I thought Baron Orman commanded Kaleb."

"He did," Chagaris responded pleasantly, leaning back and cupping his mug in his hands. "But I had to execute him. King Coriun abhors poor performance in his commanders. Orman's losses to the Radacians were frightful. Every turn of the moon he sent messages requesting more troops. The King had to call up more levies, with nothing to show for it." Chagaris smiled at him apologetically and commented, "But I am not here to discuss the lack of performance of other commanders, I am here to hear about your victories! You have won each of the five campaigns you have commanded. The King is obviously quite impressed with your record. But, is it true that you personally have never suffered a single wound in combat?"

Certainly, it was a good sign that Chagaris was aware of his spotless combat record, but rumors of his fortune in battle could be interpreted as cowardice on his own part. "I have never suffered a cut from a blade," the Baron stated. "Maces and flails have found their target often enough, and during the rebellion around Turyl I broke an arm in a fall when my horse was killed,

but it is true that no man has ever drawn blood from me with a sword or spear. I fail to understand why this story makes the rounds so.”

“Fascinating,” Chagaris exclaimed, ignoring Fralen’s apathy for the subject. “You must be blessed by Ulrik the Powerful, eh? Watched over and protected as the clerics would have us believe?”

The Baron didn’t know how to respond to that remark. While the smallfolk of Thrall prayed to many gods, the Kings largely supported Ulrik the Powerful, building temples to the stern and militaristic god in all the major towns. Fralen personally had little patience for religion and even less for clerics. He had driven all clerics out of his own lands ten years past when their useless prayers failed to save three of his children from the wasting disease. As best he could surmise, the clerics were charlatans and thieves, feeding off the fears of peasants.

Did Chagaris know of Fralen’s dislike of religion? Did he care? The late King Tromin had tolerated nearly any religious order that did not question the sanctity of the nobility. Barons were allowed wide latitude in how they handled such matters in their lands, with the understanding that allowing a cleric to gain too much influence over the peasants could be dangerous to everyone. Fralen realized uncomfortably that he did not even know King Coriun’s position on the subject.

“I guess I have just been lucky,” Fralen replied finally.

“Lucky . . . yes, lucky,” Chagaris mused. “And yet despite your luck you have also lost a great number of people closest to you. Your wife. Your children. Many of your closest advisors in battles, have you not? That must be difficult as well.”

The Baron’s unease simmered into a veiled anger. How dare this petulant man bring up his family. Or mention his lost officers as if their blood were on his hands. He reached for his glass again. “We all die eventually, Lord Chagaris. It is just a matter of how and when.”

“Well, such difficulties certainly warrant a drink,” Chagaris commented mildly, scratching at his chin with one fat finger as he watched Fralen. “I have taken enough of your time and really should return to my room. Thank you for the wine, Baron. I expect that I will want to talk with you tomorrow. You will be available?”

“As you command,” Fralen replied, his voice even despite his anger.

“Excellent,” Chagaris said. He bounced to his feet and Fralen and Donal rose as well. “Nice to meet you captain.” Before Donal could even respond, Chagaris swept out of the room, leaving the two warriors staring at the door.

“I certainly had something else in mind,” Donal said, shaking his head. “I pictured him wearing long black robes with an embroidered skull on the front as his sigil. Maybe a silver mask with bestial features.”

The Baron seethed. “What was all that about? He obviously wanted me to know that he had researched my background and knew all about my family – but to what end? All the talk of my ‘luck’ and the fact that I have never been wounded by a blade in battle. Did it not sound as if he accused me of cowardice?”

“He has never seen you in battle,” Donal objected. “He knows nothing of your leadership.” Donal’s expression broke into a wide grin. “I could see you were upset, but at the end there it almost sounded like you threatened him.”

Fralen frowned, “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m not quite sure where he was going with the conversation, but it almost felt like he threatened me.”

“He was odd, truly, but he represents the King and why would the King possibly threaten you? You took Pinixer for him – a task which everyone believed impossible – with far fewer

losses than anyone could have dreamed. It was a fantastic victory. Our enemies the Griffins are stuck down below the pass, the Golden Tide all but helpless against us here in this castle. The gold mines work day and night to enrich the King.” The younger man slapped the table with one callused hand and declared, “You are the most successful commander the kingdom has ever known! What possible reason would there be for you to fear him?”

Fralen shrugged. Certainly it was a foolish idea.

“Unless,” Donal paused, meeting the Baron’s gaze. “You think the King fears you?”

The Baron scoffed, “Why? I have faithfully served him and his father before him.”

“Undoubtedly so. But let us put ourselves in his place.” Donal was caught up in his story-telling mode, becoming more animated by the second. “Perhaps he fears you because you never lose. ‘Fearless Fralen’, whose record is spotless and whose blood has never been drawn in battle. Served unquestioningly by your men, you can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, like when the goblin horde threatened Blackbear’s lands.”

“The heralds exaggerate that tale,” the Baron objected. “You should know as you wrote most of the lyrics.”

“Regardless,” Donal continued grandly. “While King Coriun, who unlike his father has never led a military command, sits on his royal arse in Thrall you accomplish one impossible task after another, giving the heralds more fodder for fantastic tales! Imagine his fear – you never lose a battle. What if someday you were to face him on the field?”

“That is treason!” the Baron stated, his eyes flashing. “I have no desire for Coriun’s throne. I have never sought to be sung about by the blasted heralds. Nor have I sought the ‘impossible’ tasks that I have been given. I do as my King orders to the best of my ability.”

“Surely,” Donal agreed in a teasing tone. “I would never suggest otherwise. All any king could ask for is a loyal commander who never loses a campaign and who is so popular with his troops that they would follow him into hell.”

“There is no point in this speculation,” Fralen declared. “I am loyal to our King and have no aspirations other than to soak in the hot springs of Kosan instead of freezing in this drafty cursed castle. The King has nothing to fear from me, and I am sure I have nothing to fear from him. Given the emissary’s reputation, my imagination likely gave more meaning to his words than was intended.”

Donal rolled his eyes. “If it were only his veiled threats over a glass of watered wine perhaps I might agree with you. But what of the other things he has asked of us? We arranged his room exactly as he requested. The items are there, and the windows have been tarred over.”

“I have no idea what to think of that,” Fralen replied, feeling chill again even though the room was finally comfortably warm. “He asked at least twice this afternoon if we were sure we had discarded the specimens from the three men we know were killed in the battle.”

Fralen did not wish to voice his own uncomfortable conjectures, and he suspected Donal felt the same. Everything having to do with the strange orders from the emissary had stunk of forbidden blood magic. Sorcery might be commonplace in ancient legends and mother’s tales, but the Kings of Thrall had banned its practice for generations. It was an unspeakable evil that would destroy anyone foolish enough to meddle with its power. Thrall was a kingdom of warriors – strength and iron were the means of influence and power. The late King Tromin, an imposing warrior king whom the Baron had respected and served for most of his career, had once ordered him to capture and execute men the King had proclaimed “plotters and false wizards.” The men had claimed to be able to foretell the future, create salves to heal diseases, and even control the mind of one’s enemy. The Baron considered them charlatans preying on

the minds of the weak, and when captured they were cowardly and craven without exception. They certainly had possessed no magic to save them from the flames of the public pyre.

But Chagaris was the king's emissary – his voice was that of the King. He had given orders, and despite his misgivings Fralen had followed them – as he had followed orders from his king his whole life – to the letter.

Finally, Donal asked, "I should continue my rounds. Do you require anything else?"

"No," the Baron replied wearily. "I should rest. It has been a long day."

"Truly," Donal responded. He stood, grabbed his cape and headed for the door. The Baron watched his captain leave and then wearily got to his feet. With one last deep draught of the distasteful wine, he returned through the gloomy hallways to his own quarters.

The sun broke through the clouds the next morning, warming the air and melting the snow-dusted cobblestones in the courtyard. Messengers from the lower camp reported no activity on the part of the Griffin forces, so Donal and several of the officers departed on a hunting expedition for the day. The Baron would have loved to join them, but he knew that he needed to remain available for the King's emissary. He pulled open the window-coverings, letting the sun into his sitting room. Basking in the light at his desk, he took in the breathtaking view from his window.

Pinixer Keep was a forbidding castle, nestled in a wide pass between ridges of snow-capped peaks in the Sauris Mountains. Its skillfully-crafted towers blended into the jutting mountaintops, many of which thoroughly blocked the transient sun. The ice beneath their shadows was nearly as old as the mountains themselves. Each of the keep's three towers commanded an impressive view of the pass in both directions, and an unyielding stone wall enclosed them with the great hall and barracks. Massive wooden drawbridges to both the east and west lowered over a dry moat filled with rough stones and wickedly-placed iron stakes poking out of the frozen earth. Fralen shook his head as he tried to imagine taking the castle with any traditional tactics.

Off to the east he could dimly make out the town of Travis in the distance. The enemy's Golden Tide cavalry remained encamped there. An impressive, disciplined force. They were well trained, well supplied, and fearless in battle, but they were made for fighting on the plains. They would never retake Pinixer Castle. With luck, they might be capable of overwhelming the lower camp Fralen had ordered constructed at the base of the pass, but they dared not try. Even in victory their losses would be devastating and their accomplishment trivial.

The distance between Pinixer Castle and the lower camp was not great, but the steep climb exhausted even the strongest of men. Troops rotated between the lower camp and Pinixer Castle as circumstances allowed. Entertainment was easier for the men to find in Pinixer than in the lower camp, even if it was only offered by debased widows scratching out a meager existence in the dilapidated town surrounding the keep. Small hovels, many of which had been gutted to the foundation for firewood, dotted the wide, rolling mountain pass all around the castle walls. Most of the inhabitants had been killed during the battle, fled, or imprisoned and put to work in the nearby mines.

Why anyone had remained there was a mystery to Fralen, as a more desolate place he could scarcely imagine. The winds were chill and cutting, with constant barrages of snow and ice. In his homeland, the breezes flowed over the mountains warm and dry. The land there was also rugged, but flowers and blooming bushes found soil enough to brighten the landscape.

His Lady Verice had nurtured gardens of flowers that had been a wonder to behold. Her roses, vast bushes of blooms in yellow, red, pink and white, were so fragrant that he would swear he could smell them leagues away as he returned home from campaigns. She had always been in those gardens, and he loved how she had looked when he would find her there toiling among her favorite blossoms – her lustrous dark hair pulled up tight in a bun, the sweat gleaming on her almond skin, honey-gold eyes that curved up at the corners. She would run to him when she spied him returning, crying in delight.

The first three children Lady Verice bore him – little Gergi, Lori and Saru – had all been born with his own light complexion and grey eyes. Even his bastard son had his look so strongly that there had been no denying his duty when the boy was delivered to him. But Elyce, his fourth and only surviving child, was her mother reborn. Her skin was dark and flawless, and she shared her mother’s golden eyes, so intelligent and full of mischief. His servants had doted on her since the moment of her birth, even as they mourned the loss of her mother in the days that followed.

The Baron’s thoughts were interrupted as a servant stepped out onto the balcony. “M’lord. Lord Chagaris’ guards report that he asks for you to meet with him in his quarters.”

“Inform them I will be there presently,” the Baron responded. The servant silently padded off. He had hoped the emissary would not call for him so early, or perhaps at all.

He rose from the desk and crossed his mostly empty quarters, reaching for his uniform jacket. He passed the fireplace and eyed his many trophies lined on the mantle, each taken from a vanquished foe. Without allowing himself time to consider the wisdom of it, he picked up a jeweled dagger and concealed it in a deep pocket of his trousers, comforted somehow by its weight.

Several minutes later he approached the quarters that had been prepared for the King’s emissary. Two huge warriors in gleaming chain stood watch outside the door, spears held at the ready and short swords within easy reach of their mailed hands. Their flat gaze sized the Baron up carefully as he approached. He felt a touch of anger at being scrutinized so in his own keep, but they opened the door for him without a word.

The only light in the room came from a dim lamp burning on a table in the far corner. The flame was set low, and the Baron waited at the doorway to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. There was a strange herbal odor to the room, a harsh scent that stung the Baron’s nostrils and made his eyes water. He could feel the trails of vapor swirling thickly in the darkness.

“Ahhhhh,” came Chagaris’ voice from the gloom. His voice sounded exhausted, deeper than the Baron remembered from yesterday. “Please, come in. Close the door behind you.”

“If your lamp requires more oil I would be happy to send the servant for some.”

“No!” Chagaris rasped. “This light is sufficient.”

The Baron closed the door. There was a grim onus about the dark room, as if it were angry at his intrusion. His small blade in his pocket suddenly seemed like no more protection than a child’s plaything. He stood there uncertainly.

“Over here to your right,” the emissary commanded. “Come to the couch. Sit down.” The Baron slowly shuffled his way over, feeling with his feet and arms for the couch. The overpowering smoke hovering in the air stung his eyes and he stifled a cough. Concealed beneath the smoke was another odor, heavy, oppressive. Blood? He felt the couch and slid into it, knocking his knees against a hot brazier. The coals smoldered within, their dim light just revealing a stack of papers on the side table next to him. His eyes adjusted slowly to the gloom

until he saw the silhouette of his guest sitting in an overstuffed chair across from him. Several lumpy, unrecognizable objects were scattered on the table in front of him.

Chagaris began, "I forgot to ask you yesterday. Is it not odd that none of the men questioned after you took Pinixer could enlighten us as to what happened to King Tromin?"

The Baron answered carefully, "I found it odd at the time, but there were very few officers left to interrogate. And the troops claimed to know nothing." It had been widely believed that Coriun's father had been abducted by the troops of Pinixer while hunting in the mountains. His horse had been found wounded and his companions and guards murdered. A shield had been found as well, bearing the sigil of the house of Pinixer. It had been enough evidence to cause Coriun to launch the campaign that culminated with the Baron's triumphant capture of this castle. After the conquest, the Baron had sent search parties throughout the keep, its dungeons, and even the nearby mines in search of his missing King. His men had interrogated the Pinixer officers taken alive, but all denied to the death any part in the abduction.

"Unfortunately, poor King Coriun still lacks closure about the disappearance of his father," Chagaris mused. Suddenly, the emissary gasped in a quick, hurried burst of breaths, before resuming a more measured pace.

"Are you unwell?" the Baron asked. "Should I summon a healer?"

"No!" Lord Chagaris grunted. "I am fine. Your earlier report was correct, Baron. Three men made the keep in Travis."

"How can you know that?" the Baron asked, wishing instantly that he had not.

There was a long silence before Chagaris responded, "All three are in the keep." Through the gloom the Baron could make out the emissary's figure leaning forward on the chair to set something on the table in front of him. "It appears one is terrified and plans to escape. He is probably useless to us now." The Baron clenched his jaw as Chagaris spoke. There could be no denying what the emissary, a counselor to his King, was doing. There was no other explanation for how Chagaris could know what happened in Travis. Chagaris continued, "One is in the barracks. He seems confused . . . he will likely be discovered soon. He has forgotten his orders."

"They were instructed over and over to blend into the keep."

"Yes," Chagaris replied. "The stables, the weapons room, possibly in the kitchen. One of them . . . he is in the kitchen. Excellent."

The Baron pressed on. "I assume you summoned me here for a reason?"

There was movement from Chagaris, and the sound of a bottle carefully set on the table. "Yes. Information." The emissary paused, then leaned over and picked up one of the lumps from the table. "What do you know of Castle Travis?" The voice was listless, deeper, and somehow rougher than last evening.

"I have never been there," Fralen said. "We know it is much larger than Pinixer, although not as defensively sound. The keeps of the Confederation are similar in that they each contain a Great Hall, barracks, several towers -"

"Enough." Chagaris murmured. He was silent for several moments, but the Baron could see his hands moving over the lumpy object on his lap. "Who is Lord Commander since Aidan Biel assumed the Griffin throne?"

"A man named Connall."

"Do you know Connall's sigil?"

Six years past Fralen had met Connall at a tourney in Richfield. Thinking for a moment, he responded, “A sea-bird of some sort. Connall’s family was from Barnett, a city bordering the Sunburst Sea.”

“A sea-bird,” Chagaris murmured, apparently to himself. “Yes. I have seen him.” An uncomfortable silence followed, and another swirl of noxious smoke assaulted the Baron’s lungs. He finally released a cough, waving his hands in front of his face to brush away the odor. Chagaris asked in a dreamy, distant voice, “What of Mor Dragis?”

“The Captain of the Golden Tide,” Fralen answered. “A formidable warrior. His family were bannermen to the late Lord Pinixer, one brother was killed during the taking of the gates, his father and another brother killed defending Lord Caron’s tower. He was away from Pinixer, serving in the Tide at the time. Why?”

“He drinks heavily. Could be impetuous, prone to impatience and action? Perhaps unwise if prodded?”

“I cannot say,” the Baron responded, befuddled as to how Chagaris had reached such conclusions. “I expect him to be a determined, committed, and dangerous foe.”

Chagaris said, “We will see. If something happened to the Lord Commander, Dragis would take command, correct?”

The Baron hesitated. “Perhaps for a time. Dragis has been captain for years, so when Aidan Biel took the throne we thought Dragis would be picked to lead the Tide, but we understand Connall was named over him as Lord Commander.”

“Dragis is quite the physical specimen.” Through the gloom it looked like Chagaris petted something sitting on his lap. “A pity he fights for them.”

“As we are the victors holding Pinixer,” Fralen said, “I am quite satisfied with our own men.” Anger pricked at him and he demanded, “How are you able to gain this information?”

Chagaris snapped, “You should stifle your curiosity and be content to use my information to accomplish the King’s orders.”

“I intended no offense,” the Baron replied. There was an uncomfortable silence for a few moments. Fralen coughed again as the incense tickled his throat. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” Chagaris replied. “Maintain a high state of alert among the troops.”

“Connall prepares an attack?” Fralen asked doubtfully.

“No,” Chagaris said, “But it is possible that in the very near future you will attack with all your strength. With the goal of taking Castle Travis.”

“Attack Castle Travis? As the winter approaches? We haven’t the men. I am confident that in due time – perhaps before the spring – Aidan Biel will see the futility of this war and sue for peace.”

“Baron,” Chagaris hissed. “King Coriun has many plans of which you have not been apprised. Peace with the Griffin Confederation is not our goal.”

“We have no siege weapons readied, nor even the logs felled to begin their construction. My orders –”

“Orders change! If you need logs, begin procuring them. Must I remind you that I speak for the King?” Fralen clenched fists clenched but remained silent. “Good! Be ready, await my orders, and do not question me. It irritates me when commanders question orders, and when I get irritated the King finds new commanders! Do you understand?”

The Baron straightened himself in his chair. “Perfectly.”

“One other thing,” Chagaris barked. “Do you know if High Lord Aidan or Lady Deidre ever visit Travis? Attend to the troops?” Fralen shook his head. “Pity,” Chagaris muttered. “It would be so helpful if she would visit Travis.”

Fralen commented sharply, “I would imagine that the High Lord sends his underlings to report on such activities, as King Coriun does with you.”

Chagaris ignored the jibe. “I am really quite tired and need to rest for now. You may return to your own quarters.”

The Baron was quite ready to get out of the smoke-smothered room. He stood up and his elbow knocked a pile of the precariously balanced papers next to him into the brazier. Dry paper flared up into flame. His eyes widened in horror.

Squirring about on the table were two clay figures, with small legs and arms. The clay was bright red, and stuck into the figures were the “specimens” Lord Chagaris had ordered removed from the men chosen to infiltrate the Griffin forces. A ripped-out fingernail was pressed onto one of the arms, and a long flap of bloody skin was wrapped around it like a belt. The head was even more horrific – a tooth pressed into the face and a twist of the man’s hair jutting up from the head. Suddenly one of the figures jerked toward Fralen and a single large eye opened in the middle of its head, focusing on him.

“What by the hells!” Fralen swore, ripping his dagger from his pocket.

“Hold!” Chagaris commanded, his voice suddenly deep and strong. Fralen tore his gaze away from the ghastly figures and stared in disbelief at the emissary. Chagaris cradled a third clay figure in his cupped hands, one of his thumbs rubbing the head in a circular motion as a parent would comfort a child. Another bloodshot eye in the figure stared at Fralen as its diminutive legs kicked against Chagaris’ chubby fingers. Where had the eyeballs come from? They had not removed eyes from the men!

Behind the emissary Fralen spied two figures slumped against the wall. Their dress identified them as castle servants. Their arms and legs were trussed up in wire and dried blood crusted over their chests. Open mouths hung down in agony, and angry, reddened holes gaped where eyes had once been.

“How clumsy of you, Baron,” Chagaris said, his voice low and threatening. “Normally, what you have just seen would warrant your death. But that may be premature.”

Fralen could not take his eyes off the monstrous doll in Chagaris’ lap.

“King Coriun has sanctioned all that I do,” Chagaris said, his intense gaze focused hard on Fralen. “My arts achieve a greater glory for the Empire than mere armies could achieve. If you are wise, you will see that. But it is not yet time that commoners learn the benefits of our abilities. Given your contributions to the Empire, Baron, I want to spare your life. But you must not speak of this to anyone. To do so will place the responsibility for many senseless deaths on your head. Are we agreed?”

The Baron swallowed thickly. “Of course,” he replied, forcing himself to replace the dagger in his pocket.

“Good,” Chagaris replied after a few moments.

Fralen pointed to the bodies of the two servants behind Chagaris. “Why them?”

“They displeased me,” Chagaris responded. “Although they denied it, at least one of them had spat in my food. For that alone I would have had them executed, but this way their death served a purpose.” Chagaris moved his fingers under the stubby arms of the obscene clay figure in his hands, supporting the tiny figure as a father would a child until it was standing on his lap. “I know this must appear shocking to you, Baron, but you must understand the

tremendous advantage my art will give us over our enemies. Through my pets here I can see what our men in Travis see, hear what they hear, and even control them for a period of time. With a few well-placed puppets among our enemies, I can further the King's goals in a way that may ultimately save the lives of countless troops. You and I both know that the strict order and organization that Thrall brings to society in the territories we conquer is a vast improvement over their previous lives. But these Griffin lords fear to lose their power, and will gladly sacrifice the lives of their smallfolk to enhance their own position. Is it not wise to achieve our purposes while preserving the lives of as many of our citizens as possible? If you consider it carefully, you will see it is quite a bargain."

Fralen knew his very life hung in the balance. He lowered his eyes and said, "You are the King's emissary. It is not my place to question you."

"A wise philosophy," Chagaris replied, his tone full of suppressed mirth. He was enjoying this.

"Is there anything else?"

"No. You may leave now. Try to be more careful this time."

Fralen turned stiffly and made his way towards the door.

"And Baron," Chagaris called out. "Please refrain from bringing weapons into my quarters in the future. I would prefer not to order my guards to search you every time we meet."

Biting back an angry retort, Fralen closed the door behind him.