

The Dark of Night

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Chapter one

“It’s over! The City has fallen! Glory to the Eastern Empire, All hail the Emperor!”

Lorark raised a gauntleted hand to clear the blood, sweat and dirt from his face. This face, and the body that bore it, which in his youth could be noted as being handsome, was now marked with numerous puckered battle scars and burns gained in his time with the 10th legion of the Eastern Empire. One in particular, a large and vicious looking straight line ran from the middle of his heavy brow to the bottom of his chin. A scar rewarded to him by a blow mostly deflected by his helm. While at first he had been dismayed by the wound, as if he had somehow lost a part of himself in the gaining of it, he now considered himself lucky to bear it.

If it were not for the fact the benefactor of this unsightly wound, a particularly nasty spell blade he faced during one of the even nastier sieges of his fifteen year military career, had exhausted the power imbued in his sword and had been driven off balance by a lucky counter parry, he'd have joined the two thousand good men that had Lost their lives in the pursuit of a united Almoth. Instead he had just barely managed to slide his off-hand short sword hilt deep into the man's groin before being driven unconscious by the blinding pain in the middle of the battlefield.

In contrast to his lined and scarred face, aged and hardened by his years of service to the Emperor, his dark blue eyes were bright with life and an intelligence those who did not know him would guess he did not possess, his one last redeeming feature in his opinion.

He glanced over to the soldiers running to the walls towards the sound of the celebrating comrades inside the city and thought back to the times he had been as exuberant as they were. Now, after his long years of service, the things he had done and the people he had lost on the way, Lorark could not find the will inside himself to think of anything other than the men in his company that had either been wounded or killed in his service. He knew that those men did not die for the Emperor as was seen as right and proper, but for

him, their commander. He did not know why this made him feel worse, but he had promised to himself long ago that he would not forget those who died for him, and that was a promise he had yet to break.

He thought back to the beginning of his career. He would celebrate and take full advantage of the ale, smoke and whores that would flow freely after a victory, revelling in the glory of a fight well fought and the deaths of the enemies of his Emperor. He would sit around the roaring fire in the war camp surrounded by the other men, a swagger in both step and tone as he swapped stories of the fights he told the men he had won through prodigious strength or skill when he knew he had been nothing other than purely lucky to have come out alive.

Lorark would listen eagerly with the other young soldiers as old Legion heroes like Marcus of Auras regaled the younger men of their exploits, imagining that he himself would one day number among those legendary elite.

“There he was, seven feet tall and looked strong as two oxen, wearing nothing but a piece of cloth covering his cock. I swear I about pissed my britches at the sight of him!” Marcus laughed, taking a long swig of the harsh spirit favoured by soldiers in the Legions.

“His mace was a hand longer than me and heavier to boot I’d bet, but goes without saying one Eastern man is worth two o’ them Westerling fucking dogs no matter how big they come!” Marcus would regale the younger men around the fire, pausing at the right moments and emphasising certain words with the expertise only a veteran could claim.

“And then he lifts that fucking mace, roaring like a fucking animal, and comes charging at me.” The boys gasped “Oohs” and “Aah’s” Playing their role of attentive audience just as Marcus intended.

“The thing is lads, while this big bastard is charging at me it hits me, He might be big but he’s slow! Too many muscles not enough brains!” Marcus chuckled, and the boys laughed themselves hoarse.

“So he swings that big fucking thing at my head and I duck it and hamstring the bastard! I’ll tell you now lads, it makes no matter how big they are standing up, you get anyone on their back and you’ve got them, and this big bastard was no exception. He died just as quick as any with two feet of steel in his throat!”

At that Marcus would take a drink while Lorark and the other boys cheered and asked questions, some even standing up to act the move

out on each other in slow motion, with Marcus correcting when necessary. Lorark almost missed those days, before the responsibility, the guilt or the belief that what they were doing was not for the good of Almoth but rather the arrogance of two families believing they each should hold the absolute power in the country.

Now he knew he would spend the night recounting every step, every order he had given, berating himself for the losses his squad had taken, even if the reality was that he was as good a commander as there had ever been in the legions. He had his wish granted by the Gods. He was one of the elite.

He was the one those younger men now tried to emulate, the man every soldier, from recruit to general, spoke of in awe or respect. He alone knew what they did not. That with every life taken by his swords, and every man he lost to those of the enemies, he cursed the wishes of that foolish young boy. There was nothing heroic about killing and nothing heroic about war, the heroes were the ones that laid their lives down for the men around them. The rest of them were just lucky.

The Legions had been camped outside the walls of the city of Domath for three months now. Located in the far south west of Almoth, with its rolling hills and rich farmland, it was the largest of the cities of the western kingdoms and the Jewel of the western people. Domath was a wonder of city, with people travelling from all over Almoth to visit this most beautiful of all twelve major cities. It had been one of the few remaining rallying points of the Western Allegiance. It was here that the Western Allegiance had needed to hold the Eastern Empires advance, to allow enough time for fresh levies and the main veteran armies to rally together in the North near the mountain passes. Domath had succeeded, but could no longer be called anything but a ruin. The shining jewel of the west crushed under the heel of the Emperor.

The walls had finally fallen after three months of almost constant barrage of magically infused missiles the size of wagon carts thrown by catapults the size of houses, the likes of which no army had ever seen. His squad had been at the front from the beginning, with magic, arrows and boulders flying through the night from both sides, smashing, exploding and piercing into the men around him.

Noross, his squads own mage and Lorarks closest friend, had made his worth clear yet again.

The old mages potent shield causing violent shimmers in the air, protecting them from both the elemental magics of the enemy mages and more mundane arrows and stones hurled from the top of the walls. Now though, after three days of fighting in the streets, with every doorway and corner infested with defenders strengthened by their desperation, Domath had surrendered. The leaders of the opposition were dead and the city was in the power of the Eastern Empire, Where but one obstacle stood in the way of an Almoth united under The Emperor. Despite their skill, despite their veteran status and protection of Noross from his original force of two hundred and fifty men Lorarks squad had been reduced to around a hundred.

His men were resting in camp as Lorark approached and he looked around at the few men he had left as they sat together eating by the fire or playing dice for some of the few coins they had left. They were good men, the best in the legions, and Lorark felt he had let them down somehow, as he viewed the many tents and campfires that were now devoid of all the life that only three days ago two hundred men had occupied.

"I lost too many." Lorark thought to himself, almost despairing at the loss of, in his opinion, the finest squad in all the army.

There would be none of the usual celebration for them tonight as was common after victories. While the rest of the legions would be drinking and whoring until the early hours his squad would be packing their gear and gathering supplies for the march east in the morning.

The Darkened sons were to be disbanded and relieved of active duty that night. That was the reward granted to him by Emperor Taviiss Murok and his brother and their General, Tavor. The Darkened sons had been on the front lines now for the last ten long years and each man were masters of the blade, tested again and again until they were known as unbreakable. Each man stood next to another, linking shields and every man in the army knew that they would not run, regardless of what was coming towards them.

Now though, after ten years of service and being decimated by the siege, they were being allowed to go home. Each man had only thoughts of home and family, regardless of how much his Emperor lauded their skills and achievements and grated at their loss. But it was done. They had finally reached ten years of service, and now with Domath fallen and the Eastern Kingdoms outnumbering any serious resistance three to one, they would finally be on their way home.

Despite the agreement however, Lorark was worried. The Emperor was not known to lose

anything he valued, and Lorark knew that his value and the value of his men would not sit well with him. Despite his brothers' stern but fair influence, the Emperor was not known as a great leader, and Lorark knew from the last ten years that the Emperor could be vicious, cruel and especially petty when the mood took him.

He had an agreement, but he was wary of the Emperor, who despite their standing in the army could order their deaths at any time. Tonight his men would also be sharpening their blades, checking the straps on their armour and polishing breastplates to the shine worthy of the sons. If they were forced to fight, however, Lorark knew it would be a devastatingly short one. The Emperors guard were something more than human now, or less human may be more accurate.

“Lark?”

“Do you hear me Lorark?”

Lorark shook himself from his dark thoughts and looked towards Noross, his friend and companies Elementalist. His skin was jet black and the piercing blue eyes of his Kind shone even in the twilight of the day. His white robes, in stark contrast to everyone else in the squad, were

immaculate, and his arms were covered to the elbows in strange bracelets of different metals.

Most would think these idle decorations but Lorark knew better, each of these contained different levels and types of his power, Stored to be used in the event of exhaustion or dire need. Everyone knew Mages didn't age as normal men did, with older mages growing in power as time went on. Most in the legions thought Noross was an ancient at three hundred, as his powers were known to be among the greatest in the legion. Lorark however knew the truth; Noross was three hundred when their great, great grandfathers were but boys and despite it looked no older than Lorark himself, who still felt young at thirty-two seasons.

“Noross?” He said, glancing at the mage. “I'm sorry my old friend my thoughts were leagues away.” Lorark murmured, shifting his large, muscled body towards his friend, his dented and well used armour looking at odds with the immaculate looking Noross.

“You look troubled Lark, Do you still think the Emperor will go back on his word?” Noross looked to him with concern, his face betraying the calm tone of his words, it wouldn't do for the other men to hear doubt enter his voice. The men believed Noross to be more powerful than any Emperor. Lorark knew they couldn't be further

from the truth of things despite the power Noross wielded, even if the old mage only used but a fraction of his true power.

If the wrong people knew just how old and powerful he was, it wouldn't be long until he was hunted down and destroyed by those jealous or threatened enough to try. The will of the Emperor was absolute, especially now his enemies had been broken.

“As always you see the truth of it old man.” Lorark chuckled. “I know the law, and I know we've paid with blood and time to be able to see our families again, but I can't help but feel that the Emperor might see it differently, we've been his best company for years, and it must burn him to be letting us go, law or no law.”

Noross frowned, appearing deep in thought.

“Look Lark, I know you said not to do anything if the raven guard try and stop us, but I have more than a few tricks up my sleeve to get us away, there are only 100 of us now, It wouldn't be too difficult for me to get us a head start if we were to make a run-.”

“You're right” Lorark interrupted, It would not do for anyone to overhear any of these tricks. “Be ready, just in case things go wrong, form everyone up while I go and get our leaving papers from the General.”

Lorark looked towards the command tent and sighed, *maybe I'm just getting old and paranoid*. He thought to himself. He wasn't a young man anymore, his broad face scarred over his right eye, his short, black hair starting to grey at the temples. It seemed an age ago that he was a young man, before the siege of Tumalt, before the breaking of the Elemental Warrior Krang by his Squad, and his duel with the Eastern Kingdoms Prince Norark.

Youth had given way to a strength and constitution brought on by experience, though his wounds long healed still gave him pain during the long nights in his tent. It was over though, he could finally go home to the family he had left, and perhaps he still had time enough to do something good in the world other than killing.

Shaking himself again he started at a brisk walk towards the tent. On the way he checked his gauntlets and sword belt, tightening the straps and making sure nothing had broken or worn from use, though they didn't need it. Lorark just liked to be sure. His father, The blacksmith in the village where he had grown up, had always told him a man would never be let down by his tools if he took care of them, and that advice had saved Lorarks life more than once.

He arrived at the command tent and was waved forward by the Sentry of the Raven guard, who had straightened themselves as he had

approached and raised an arm in respect. His squad were beneath the guard in the army hierarchy, but over the years, as he and his squad had overcome greater odds, and defeated greater and greater challenges, the respect of almost all of the men in the camp had risen to the point that he and his men were almost legends.

To be recruited by Lorark was seen as almost as great an honour as being promoted by the Emperor himself, and Lorark wasn't sure how the Emperor would feel about that if he knew. *If he knew then I probably would've been stabbed in my sleep.* Lorark grinned as he entered. The brothers Taviiss and Tavor were standing at the command table looking at an array of maps pinned to it, with figures representing their army filling almost every space on it, with the figures of the enemy numbering only a handful. *You've almost won then, only one last army to challenge the Eastern Kingdoms; I just hope it was worth it.*

Lorark stepped inside and gave off a crisp bow, falling to one knee as he did so. "Rise Commander. It is a glorious day is it not?" A youthful, almost soft voice called from above.

Lorark rose, looking at one brother to the next. The emperor was dressed in pristine armour, Lacquered blue and gold and looked as if a sword hadn't been within ten metres of it in anger. The Emperor himself was almost a youth, in his mid-

twenties with long brown hair tied in a warriors braid behind him, his green eyes sparkling in triumph as he regarded the commander.

His brothers was a stark contrast, His head bald and face grey and bearded, His thick uncoloured plate armour dented and scratched in a dozen places.

“It is my Emperor, another fantastic victory, and now the Empire is almost whole, as is right.”

“*Probably Best to be diplomatic*”, thought Lorark.

“If I may sir, I have come for the papers allowing my squad to disband from the army and return to our families as you graciously agreed.”

The Emperor frowned, and Lorark thought he caught a sneer as he looked up, The Emperor seemed to stop himself from giving his first answer, “Ah yes of course, they are on the table over there. Each man has a full honourable dismissal, with full pensions and 20 gold coins for their service to their Emperor. Are you sure you will not stay?” The Emperor asked, raising his brow.

“I am afraid that we are eager to all put an end to our violent occupations my lord, but I thank you for your generosity.”

Anger seemed to flare quickly into the Emperors eyes, and just as quickly, as quickly as Lorark might have thought he imagined it, it left.

“Of course commander of course, though it is not wise to deny an Emperor, I will relent this once.”

Lorark tensed at the last, almost expecting the eagle guard around the room to unsheathe their blades. However nothing of the sort happened and Lorark was forced to shake himself and bow once more.

“I thank you my Emperor, it was an honour to serve your will, and I hope our paths cross again.”

The Emperor seemed almost amused by that, “Oh I’m sure we will commander, you may leave.”

Lorark turned and walked from the tent once more. He had done it, He and his squad would be away as soon as he returned and within a few weeks he would be with his family once more. He had been given everything he had wanted, so why did his instinct, the one all good soldiers eventually develop, the one who prompted him to hidden ambushes or assassination attempts, scream at him that something was so wrong?

Lorark left the tent, pressing between the two Eagle guard standing ram-rod straight, perfect examples of military discipline. He glanced at each man as he went by, and despite his years of interaction with the Elite of the Emperors personal

guard, he still could not escape the slightly unsettled feeling that everyone outside of the mysterious order that they belonged felt in their presence.

Lark knew that this was the result of the spell work enchanted on the inside of their ink black armour, designed to strike fear and uncertainty in the enemy. Unfortunately this particular bit of magic did not differentiate between friend or foe. It had taken Lorark a long time to settle the fear that had so many new recruits, and some not so new, running past on their business as quickly as feet or hoof would carry them. Lorark also knew that that spellwork changed man who bore it, and that fear was the least of the Raven guards powers.

Lorark was legendary within the army, and usually he could not pass between one camp and another without a dozen small interactions with other soldiers in the army. Usually this would be a quick word of encouragement to youths that looked upon him almost in awe, and made him feel like an old man, to a grinned joke or quick conversation with officers and veterans he had known for what seemed to be his whole life.

This time however he raised the hood of his cloak and covered the distinctive armour and sword hilt known throughout the legions as best he

could. He wanted to get back to the men as soon as possible and be away without ceremony.

Why can't I stop feeling like I'm missing something? The Emperor has seemed almost...reasonable.

Lorark made quickly to his camp, and as he arrived he saw that Noross had gathered the men and they had struck camp in almost record time.

Their as eager to be away as I am, 10 years is a long time without the warmth of your wife or the smiles of your children.

Lorark looked upon the four assembled squares of men each led by his lieutenants and trusted friends. The squares that each man led had once been made of fifty men apiece, trained and battle hardened to fight as separate units or a cohesive whole. This gave his men, with their well-made plated armour and swords spell forged to hold their edge and be lighter than the ordinary equivalent, versatility that no other squad in the legions possessed.

This training, and the equipment Lorark had spent so much on, had enabled his men to survive where most others would fall. Their loyalty to Lorark and his Lieutenants were not gained by gold or promises of looting as had been the approach and eventual downfall of so many other squads in the legions, but by the deeds of Lorark and his most trusted few. Over the years his men

had seen he and the others lay their lives on the line in battle to save their men time and time again, and thus the men Lorark loved like sons loved him as a father, and fought with an almost inhuman level of determination.

Looking at each of his lieutenants in turn, Lorark was amused to see the expressions on the faces of these very different men, each face making not hiding the emotions they felt as the day finally came to disband.

Noross was leaning on a fence post, the rest of the fence having been torn down for wood during the siege, a wide grin showing teeth so white they seemed to almost glow against his dusky black skin. Noross was as easy going a Mage as Lorark had ever met, and had become his most trusted and dearest friend as they rose together. Lorark a young and fiery tempered man looking for a fight, and Noross, far older than Lorark could imagine at the time, providing a staying hand and guiding influence that Lorark believed had sculpted him into the man he had eventually become.

The next square was headed by what Lorark, and many of the new men to arrive in the legions, had at first thought to be a giant. Scot'ial was almost seven feet tall, and almost twice as wide as Lorark himself, who was by no means a small man. Clad in dull grey plate armour almost an inch thick, with a squat, almost square full visored helm

under his arm, Scot'ial was perhaps the most intimidating man Lorark had ever met. Scot'ial had joined the legion after travelling from his home in the far north of the continent. One day before the legions engaged the west, he had simply shown up at the edge of Lorarks camp, saying nothing. The next day he killed more men than any ten in his unit, and two years later was the commander of 2nd squad. The people there were little known, but had a reputation for being fierce warriors of great skill. Lorark hoped that Scot'ial was exceptional among his own people. The idea of a full army of men of his Calibre was a worrying prospect, but thankfully not a prospect that should concern him now.

“Scot'ial, what is the status of your squad?” Lorark asked, shifting his eyes to the depleted ranks in front of him.

Scot'ials eyes shifted to the floor, his people had an odd sense of honour and Lorark knew he bore the losses almost as if he were personally responsible.

In his soft, almost high voice, so unlike the man himself, he spoke. “Twenty-two left sir, two wounded but expected to live, I've had all the men outfitted with new weapons and armour, the smithy's owed the squad after we got the bastards that almost had him in that last night raid last week. We're as ready to go as we could ever be, the wagons and supplies are on carts ready for the

march and a cart for the wounded is ready to go.” He concluded, looking ashamed that he even had wounded at all.

The man takes too much responsibility for consequences out of his control, a good man, but an unreasonable one. Lorark thought to himself.

He walked forward and leaned in close for a private word, knowing that if he said them for the others to hear it would only make the matter worse, These Northern men had a prickly sense of pride at the best of times.

“Scot’ial my friend, you have to know that the losses of your squad do not reflect on you or your skills, you were in the front line man, the losses would have been much larger if not for your bloody minded stubbornness to be in the front rank the whole battle, waving that tree trunk you call a sword.” Lorark smiled, holding his head back at an almost absurd angle to look the giant in the eyes.

Scot’ial gave a small smile back, but still looked abashed as he spoke, ”Thank you sir, but this tree trunk has served me better than any of the tooth picks you southern girls call swords ever could.”

Lorark gave a quick, barking laugh, almost forgetting the foreboding feeling he had been left with since his conversation with the Emperor. He

walked backwards a few steps and continued the inspection.

The next block of men was led by one of the most unusual but effective warriors Lorark had ever encountered. Kelise looked like a beautiful young maiden, fair skinned with big blue eyes and hair shiny and brown, almost waif like and under five feet in height. She, unusually, was a woman. This fact was most unusual, and as the only woman without magical talent in the legions she was unique.

She was also every bit as dangerous as Scot'ial or the others, if not more so. She may be small, thin and light but this did not hold her back. Wearing a shining, full sleeved leather jerkin, and padded trousers, she was dressed unlike any other noble born woman he had ever seen.

The startling array of daggers and short blades that were securely sheathed upon her arms, torso and legs had been collected on battlefields, obscure merchants and even card games won over the years. Each was magically forged to be lighter, sharper and more durable than an average sword.

This and a combination of deadly skill honed over her four years with Lorark had forged her into a warrior even Lorark could not be sure of defeating. What she lacked in male strength she more than made up for in speed and instinct, always stepping, striking or throwing exactly when

she should. She smiled prettily as Lorark gave a quick visual inspection of her unit.

In the beginning the men had been awkward and uncomfortable taking orders from a woman, but this feeling quickly abated as Kel sliced and stabbed her way through men twice her size and almost three times her weight.

Kelise smiled pretty up to Lorark and gave up a small, crisp salute, delicate glove to chest. “Lorark, sir.” She continued, her smile dropping to a smirk of distaste. “I have seventeen left, no wounded. That damn Spell singer didn’t leave much in the way of wounds. The 3rd also have new armour and weapons, and will be ready to go with the hour.”

She’s right. Lorark thought. *That last spell singer would have had the whole squad if she hadn’t picked up a few of those throwing blades of hers.*

The fighting during the siege had been among the worst of their careers. Towards the end a group of veterans led by the last few enemy mages had gathered in one of the main squares of the city, well organised and having time to prepare the ground, they proved stiff resistance for the company. As the fighting was at its hottest, Noross had been unable to provide his usual shielding to the whole company and was forced to engage the mages at the front, throwing devastating

spells as he protected what he could of the front lines.

The spell singer had come from behind in Ambush, and 3rd squad had been forced to endure the full power of the singers spells. Spell singers were different from regular mages, who used intense concentration, gestures and focuses such as staves or wands to wield magic. Spell singers used verbal spells, which had given them the name of spell singer. Song in itself was not required for them to wield magic but many of the incantations and spell words had an almost sing-song quality to them.

Though these lesser mages were capable of far less than their more powerful counterparts, they could do horrible damage to unprotected men. It had taken a well-aimed throwing knife, with counter magic wrought in the forging, to kill the singer.

Afterwards, from the men, he had heard it was a throw that no-one thought possible, flung end over end through the air as she dived to avoid the killing magic of the mage. A truly remarkable throw apparently, but no more than Lorark was used to from Kelise, he had grown to appreciate her skills as well as her frank attitude and almost depraved sense of humour.

Lorark smiled down at her, “ I heard we might have been fucked if it wasn’t for one of your increasing possible impossible throws, “ he grinned, knowing that however much she seemed to defy the pre-conceived notions of her gender, she was like everyone else in enjoying praise for a job well done.

“Maybe sir, but it’s hard to sing with one lung!” She grinned, her head inclining at the compliment while some of the men around her sniggered. Her men, while to begin with uncomfortable the woman, now almost worshipped her, and were fiercely protective as a result, these men were almost as much hers as his.

This might concern another company commander, with jealousy and perhaps bitterness to follow, but Lorark knew that as long as Kelise followed him, and should would gladly walk into any fight no matter how likely it would end in them getting stabbed to an unpleasant death, then the men would follow. This suited him just fine. Some of the men may have even had romantic inclinations towards the woman, she was indeed a beautiful woman, with grace and a body well-proportioned but conditioned into a lean and strong figure.

This notion had quickly left the heads of even the most love-struck men however, as the first time they reached a city with a whorehouse she had

taken what looked like most of the whores in the city to her bed. She was as different to other women as she could be, and seemed to have similar tastes in women as the rest of them.

Lorark continued on to 4th squad, and embraced the man at the front of the square in the traditional handshake of the soldier, banging each other's wrists together before grasping hands tightly. Hackett Daneil was old. Not old for a soldier, which would be mid-thirties, but old by any definition other than a mages.

Hackett looked Lorark up and down, inspecting him every bit as Lorark was inspecting the men.

“You’re still alive then? That right gauntlet needs a repair. Has nothing I’ve taught you stuck boy? Are you still looking to get killed for laziness?” He said gruffly, looking Lorark in the eyes with a glint of humour in his own.

At fifty three summers he was one of the oldest men in the Legions, and it showed. He seemed to be made entirely of scar tissue and cracked wrinkled skin. His smile showing missing teeth and an eye patch, while hiding the hole where his left eye should be, did not hide the large, deep scar that was made by a glancing blow of an axe twenty years before. The rest of his face, as well as his body Lorark knew, was covered in deep gashes and scars earned through over twenty campaigns he

had made in his long career. Lorark was sure it was sheer stubbornness that kept the old man up.

Lorark grinned back at the old man. He knew as well as he did that his armour was in perfect condition thanks to the Spell work written into the inside of each piece.

“Are you going blind or senile old man? This armour is perfect, which is more than I can say for that shredded piece of tin you call a breastplate!” Lorark grinned, Hackett did not trust in anything but steel and his own hand, and spurned offers of magical aid.

“Magic is great protection.” He’d say in his cups. “Until it isn’t. Then it’s as useful as a spare prick in a brothel, only a prick isn’t likely to get you gutted by a westerlings spear. It’ll be a cold day in the underworld when some peasant with a sharp stick gets me because some fool mages spell work fails.”

Hackett had been the commander of the company before Lorark, and had trained, taught and berated him every day since Lorark had wandered into his company with the other recruits. After the first battle, in which Lorark had basically stood frozen in place, pissing himself at every opportunity, he had swung wildly at a warrior, striking him just in time to stop him from putting the old man down. Since that day Hanson had

taken Lorark to task, shaping him from that scared boy into a man.

“How fares the 4th?” Lorark asked, looking forward to the crisp lines of swordsman before him.

Hackett spat to the ground before replying. “Lost a few more than I’d have liked, damn westerlings don’t know when to give up. More than once they’d take down one of ours with a sword in their bellies, damn impolite of the bastards if you ask me.”

Lorark nodded, he’d seen the like more than once during the battle. When there is nowhere to run, no rear position to fall back to, desperation could make any man dangerous, regardless of wounds.

“Anyway, we’ve lost ten, with four wounded. Nasty ones too, won’t be walking for a while yet. Thirty six whole and ready to go on your order”

Hackett spat again, he hated the western kingdoms, though Lorark had never found out why exactly.

Despite his advanced years Lorark knew Hackett was almost as dangerous as any of the others. While the years had robbed much of his strength and speed had done nothing to rob him of the skill and experience that had won him more commendations than any other soldier in the

legions. His squad has suffered the least losses, Hackett knowing where to put his men to have the most effect against the enemy with the least risk. It was his ability to train and shape men that had kept him by Lorark's side long after most commanders would relegate him to the background as younger men showed more strength of arm.

Knowledge of the wounded bothered Lorark. With the 1st, his squad of twenty-six included, they numbered one hundred and two. This would prove too much for any force of bandits they might encounter on the march home, but it was when it was time to separate that gave Lorark pause. Eight wounded men, with five that were either maimed or too badly injured to work weighed heavily on his conscience. Perhaps he would offer to take them back to his village, there was always some work to be done at the forge, and assistants would be helpful.

Lorark shook himself from his thoughts, bringing his attention back to Hackett.

“Good, we’ll be heading off within the hour. Looking forward to retirement?”

Hackett looked thoughtful for a moment, “Aye boy, I might just be. I’ve been fighting in this war and others exactly like it my whole life. Think it might be time to settle down with the other old men and swap my stories. Gods I’ve enough of them at this point!”

Lorark chuckled, “Too many, old man! They’ll be tired of you before the month is out!” He clapped his mentor on the shoulder. He hoped retirement would suit him as much as he hoped it would himself.

Taking a few steps backwards to address his troops, he glanced at Noross who nodded back. Lorark spoke in his normal speaking voice with the knowledge that Noross’s spell would allow every soldier to hear him as if they were stood shoulder to shoulder, a valuable spell and one he used often.

“Brothers, our service has ended. We’re leaving good men behind, too many. However, I know that you will honour their memories in the years to come. We have our papers, our gold and our freedom. Let us go home to our wives and grow fat and old in comfort as we deserve!”

The men cheered, swords raised. Lorark almost winced at the words he hoped were true but had so much trouble truly believing.

Chapter two