



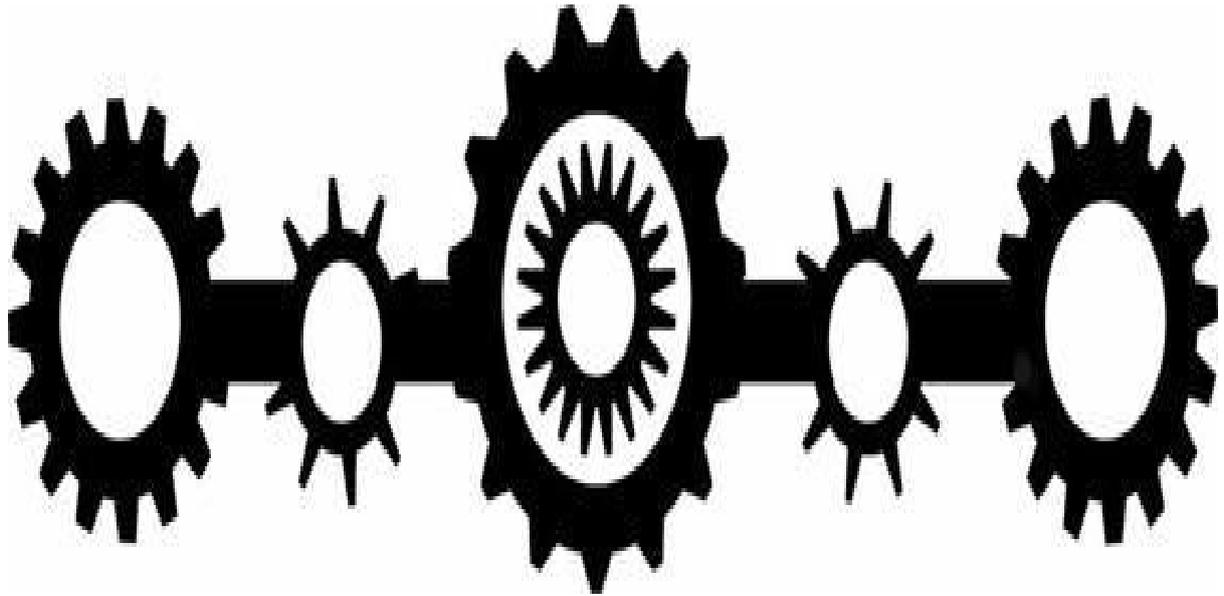
BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING  GAME

# INTO the STORM



BY LARRY CORREIA





**INTO THE STORM**

**LARRY CORREIA**

*Cover by*

**MARCO MAZZONI**

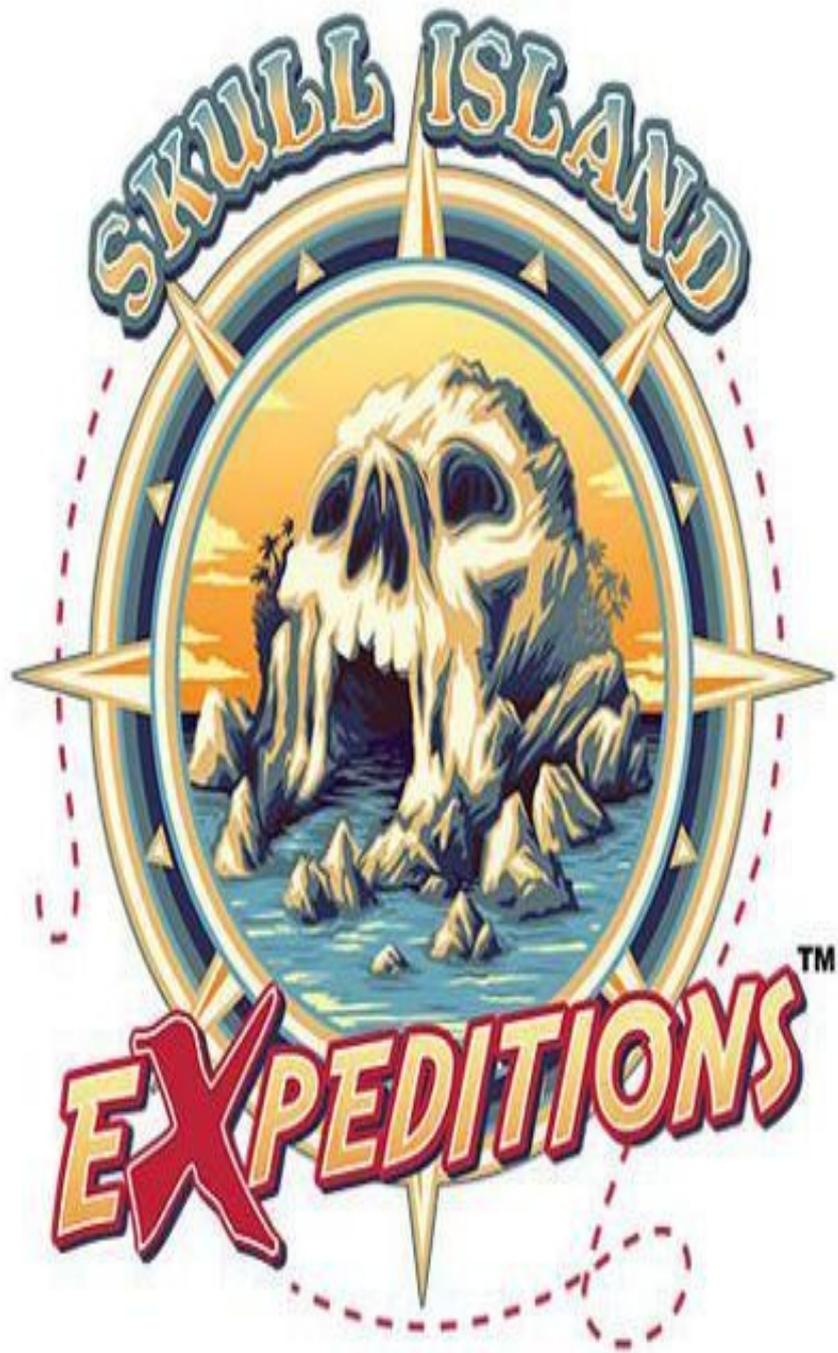
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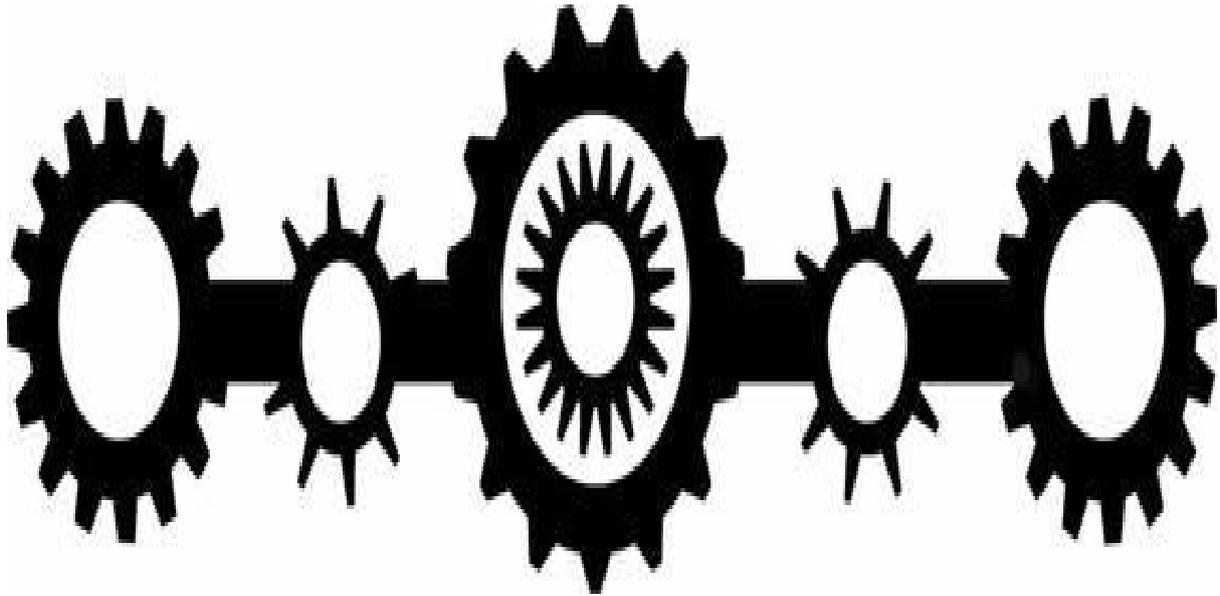


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*A knight of Cygnar follows a strict moral code. His integrity is beyond reproach, he conducts himself as a gentleman at all times whether dealing with friend or foe, and he values honor above all. For a man to be knighted by the King of Cygnar is to place the eyes of the entire kingdom upon him, as if to say, “Behold this stalwart hero, for he is all that a warrior should aspire to be.”*

—Records of Chivalry by Lord Percival Rainworth 486 AR



## **PART I: THE RECRUITERS**

*Spring, 606 AR*

**H**e hadn't been dealt a very good hand, but when you make a habit of gambling with your life, you learned to make your own luck.

Considering that the tavern was a seedy little place on the outskirts of a tiny village deep in the Thornwood, it was fairly crowded. The patrons were rough folk, gathered here to spend their ill-gotten gains on poor quality ale, bad food, and ugly prostitutes. The tavern was the center of a lawless, wild settlement. The entire village consisted of a handful of huts on stilts to keep them out of the mud, a flea-ridden stable, and this sorry excuse for a tavern. It was made of logs slowly being devoured by moss and was so ramshackle it didn't even warrant a name. This place was still within the borders of Cygnar, but only in the loosest sense of where lines fell on a map. The village was a forgotten place and a haven for bandits, though he was only looking for one bandit in particular.

"You been pondering on those cards a long time . . . What's your play, stranger?"

"I'm in. Knights over jacks."

One of the other players scoffed. "Not bloody likely odds, that."

"I'm feeling lucky." He slid three farthings across the table "Give me one more."

"Bold move, gambler." The dealer shoved another card at him. He was a big, thick-armed man, with a bushy black beard that would make any Khadoran proud. The dealer matched the description of a certain bandit leader with a hefty price on his head. "If you're so confident, how come only three coppers?"

"Well, after losing the last few rounds to you boys, I'm afraid that's all I've got left to my name."

"Times are lean," the dealer agreed. His armored great coat opened a bit as he leaned back, revealing a holstered repeater. That confirmed every man at the table was packing at least one weapon, a reasonable precaution in the Thornwood. "You looking

for work, gambler?”

The two other players exchanged knowing glances. Of course, they were all with the same gang, so they would know what was coming next. The Thornwood Blades needed recruits. He'd made sure he looked the part. These types always fit a certain mold.

The gambler picked up the card. It was the Black Knight. *Appropriate*. “I'm between jobs.”

“You strike me as a fella that knows how to handle himself.” The dealer gestured at the Caspian battle blade leaning against their table. “Seems like that sword has seen some use.”

“A bit.” He looked down at his sword. The metal grip had been polished smooth by hundreds of hours beneath callused hands. The cross guard was nicked and dented from countless impacts. “It's gotten me by.”

“You're a sight older than most of my men, but I figure a fella don't get to be your age wandering around places like this without knowing how to take of himself. Marks on your face say you're no stranger to getting cut.” The dealer ran his finger across his jawline, or at least where he probably had a jaw under all of that beard. “There's work to be had here, good work, if you've got the guts for it.”

“When there's enough crowns involved, I find the guts.”

“That's what I like to hear.” Their current round of Fellig's Fortunes was forgotten. Their hands of cards were laid on the table, and now it was time to talk business. The dealer leaned over the table conspiratorially, though everybody in the tavern either already knew or suspected his identity, and they were all too crooked themselves to try and collect a bounty. “The name's Devlin. You heard of me?”

*Devlin Norwick. Leader of the Thornwood Blades. Killer of men, women, and children.* “Can't say that I have, but I'm just passing through.”

“My trade is on the roads to the east. Take what I want. Make a tidy profit doing so. Locals get a piece too, so they're keen on keeping us around. I've got an outfit, and I could always use a good swordsman. I'm short a few hands—”

One of the other bandits loudly interrupted. “Only because of that bastard Madigan killing them!”

Devlin just shook his head. “We'll deal with him in time, Rolf.”

But the outburst had attracted the attention of some of the other patrons, who had begun muttering as well. The name seemed to be well known by many of the local cutthroats and invoked either nervousness or anger.

“Madigan, eh? Never heard of him either. He seems like a beloved sort.”

“*Sir* Madigan. Cygnaran Army. He's been hunting our gang all up and down the Thornwood. Latches on like a war dog and won't let go.”

Another bandit pounded the table for emphasis. “Makes life miserable for the workin' man, he does!”

“Cage it, Nash,” Devlin ordered. The bandit shut his mouth. “We had us a nice arrangement with the authorities before this Madigan came along. Even the army don't like him. They say he's an evil type, brings bad luck wherever he goes. So they sent him out here to fight farrow or some scut work, but he had to go sticking his nose into other folks' dealings. You know how them knights are.”

“Pushy know-it-alls, the lot of them,” he agreed. “But I've got an empty coin purse,

an empty stomach, and an empty mug, so why don't you buy us some dinner and a round of drinks, and tell me more about this job of yours, Mr. Devlin?"

"I like that attitude—"

"*Attention, villagers!*" The tavern fell silent as everyone turned to see who had shouted. The newcomer was a tall, handsome young man who was obviously, painfully out of place. Though his expensive wool great coat had recently picked up some traveling grime, it was probably the cleanest thing the tavern had ever seen. When he got a lungful of the thick smoke filling the room, he began to cough, then covered his mouth with a clean, white handkerchief. "Thank you. Pardon my interruption, villagers, but I am here to deliver an urgent message and would appreciate your assistance."

The well-spoken young man might as well have entered holding a sign that read *Rob me and leave my corpse in a ditch*. Rolf turned to Devlin and whispered, "I reckon he's not from around these parts."

"I am looking for someone. I was told at the fort that I could find Lieutenant Hugh Madigan here."

*Bloody hell!*

It was silent for a long few seconds, and then nearly everyone in the room began to laugh uproariously.

"What's so funny?" The room was uncomfortably hot from the roaring fireplace, so the newcomer unbuttoned his great coat, revealing the bright blue uniform of the Cygnaran Army. The laughter slowly died and hands moved toward guns or blades as the patrons realized this was no joke. "This is no laughing matter. I have an important message for Lieutenant Madigan."

"Sorry, young sir." The tavern owner approached cautiously. "I think you've got the wrong place and should be going now before anything bad happens."

"Bad? What? This is important. Once again, I'm looking for Lieutenant Hugh Madigan, Third Platoon, 22nd Company. I've got priority orders straight from Corvis."

"Ha, ha! Yes, very amusing." The proprietor took the young man by the sleeve, trying to hustle him out the door before his establishment had yet another killing inside of it. "Please, sir. Right this way."

"Are you daft, man?" The oblivious soldier pushed the tavern owner away. "I'm Sergeant Cleasby, and I'm on important business on behalf of the crown. This is a priority. You probably don't get that much out here in the backwoods."

"Hold on, now!" shouted a rat-faced man from the opposite corner. "What's all this about Madigan being here?"

"I was told the lieutenant was in this village hunting for a bandit gang."

*Oh, you dithering imbecile.* The gambler reached slowly for his sword. The bandits in the room were glancing about nervously now. The tavern owner retreated for safety.

"I've not met him, but he was described as being in his late forties, in excellent health, of average height, grey haired . . ." Sergeant Cleasby was glancing about the room as well but found he was the only person dressed in blue and gold. "He may not be in uniform."

Devlin turned to study the newest addition to their game of Fellig's Fortunes.

"He is a swordsman of some renown, favors a Caspian blade . . . Let's see, what

else?”

Rolf and Nash turned to stare at the big sword leaning against the table. Devlin’s eyes narrowed dangerously, then he shook his head slowly in the negative. “Easy there, gambler,” Devlin whispered. “Let’s hear the lad out.”

He stopped reaching for his sword and calmly placed his hands on his lap. There was bad luck, and then there was military incompetence. The two often went hand in hand.

“Oh yes, Madigan has distinctive scars on his face from the Scharde Invasions, sustained in an action for which he received the Star of Valor and knighthood—”

“Where’s these scars on his face at, boy?” Rolf asked as he pulled the hand cannon from his belt.

“Boy?” Cleasby grew indignant. “How dare—”

“Where are the scars?” Devlin demanded.

Several other men had risen from their seats. Knives and guns had been drawn. Many eyes were now focused on Devlin’s table and followed his gaze. Madigan had been a plague on every bandit in this part of the Thornwood for months. Other toughs were approaching Cleasby, who only now was realizing what he had blundered into. Cleasby raised his hands defensively as several weapons were pointed his way. “Gentlemen, calm down, please . . . I must have the wrong village. I’ll be on my way.”

This time Devlin roared. “*Where are Madigan’s scars?*”

Cleasby swallowed hard. “On his cheek and jaw.”

Everyone in the tavern was looking at him now. The gambler’s eyes flashed back and forth, a movement most would take for fear but a few would recognize as an experienced combatant assessing every potential threat. There were a *lot* of threats.

Devlin grinned, showing off blackened teeth. “Pleasure to meet you finally, Sir Madigan. Good thing you got yourself uglified up to such a noteworthy degree.”

“I was marked by a Satyxis whip. Left me a face only a mother could love.” The gambler’s voice was cold, and he no longer sounded like a hungry bandit, but rather a commander of men. “Devlin Norwick, in the name of the crown, I hereby arrest you for murder, banditry, general lawlessness, and the theft of military supplies. Surrender your arms and stand down. Resist and I’ll kill you.”

“By yourself?”

“What do you think, Devlin?”

“I think if you’d brought help, they would’ve stopped this idiot from coming in here and mouthing off.” Devlin moved his head from side to side, making a big show of taking in the many well-armed and surly patrons. “You’re as mad as they say, coming in here alone, demanding my surrender.”

“I’ll take that as a no. Sergeant Cleasby, take these men into custody.”

“Uh . . .” The young soldier had been surrounded by a few members of the Thornwood Blades and was slowly being backed into a corner. “That’ll be just a moment, sir!”

“I’ll hand it to you, old man. You’ve got a pair on you.” Devlin chuckled. The great battle blade was still sheathed, resting against the table, only a foot from Madigan. Devlin eyed the sword. “But nobody’s that fast.”

Madigan raised his voice so every occupant of the tavern could hear him clearly. “I’m only here for Devlin Norwick. He’s not worth dying for. I don’t give a damn

about the rest of you or what you may have done, but if you raise so much as a finger in my way, I swear I will begin to give a damn, and none of us want that.”

Devlin’s snarl displayed his rotten teeth. “Shoot him, Rolf. Shoot the knight in his big, stupid mouth.”

Rolf lifted the hand cannon.

*POP.*

The noise came from beneath the table. Rolf gasped as the bullet hit him in the pelvis.

When you leave a big sword in the open, people tended to focus on it rather than on the tiny hideout pistol hidden in your coat sleeve. Madigan dropped the pistol, stuck his hands beneath the heavy wooden table, and flipped it end over end, throwing cards, money, and drinks in every direction. Devlin was faster than he looked and managed to get mostly out of the way. Nash stumbled, tangling his feet with his chair. Distracted by pain, Rolf fired. His single heavy round blew a hole through the table before pulverizing several bricks of the fireplace. Madigan went for his sword.

The entire room had exploded into motion, but for Madigan time seemed to slow to a crawl. His blade was falling toward the ground. Devlin was going for his repeating pistol and represented the most imminent threat. Nash was still toppling backward. Thugs were rushing Cleasby, who was now in a full-blown retreat. There were a dozen other potential combatants in the tavern, but they weren’t committed yet. The best way to convince them to stay that way would be a show of overwhelming force.

The bandit leader had been right about one thing: you didn’t get to his age in a world like this without learning how to take care of yourself.

Madigan caught his sword by the handle and tugged, freeing three feet of hardened steel from the sheath in one practiced motion. He struck. The muzzle of Devlin’s repeater was coming his way, but Devlin cried out as the sword split his hand in half. The pistol went flying.

Nash hit the ground on his back but didn’t lose his grip on his pistol. The Caspian battle blade was designed for slashing rather than stabbing, but it made no difference when the wide, rounded point was driven with a great deal of force into a fallen opponent’s trachea. Nash made a horrible gurgling noise as he died.

Devlin stumbled away, holding his ruined hand to his chest, blood pouring down his arm. “Get him!” The command was pointless, as the other Thornwood Blades had already launched themselves in Madigan’s direction.

He turned to intercept two new attackers. A tankard was flung at his head, but he simply knocked it aside with his sword. He stepped back, avoiding the clumsy lunge of a man with a dagger, then used the superior reach of his sword to counterattack low, striking for the leg. Flesh parted until the sword removed a chunk of bone. The bandit howled and collapsed as his ruined leg buckled beneath him.

The second man had a banded club. Extremely strong, he struck with great enthusiasm. Strength and enthusiasm were no match for experience, however; with a flick of the wrist Madigan deflected the club to the side and then sliced through the bandit’s throat on the backswing. He was searching for the next threat long before the club-wielding bandit realized his life was pouring down his shirt.

The hideout pistol wasn’t a particularly powerful firearm, so Rolf was still alive. The hand cannon was broken open, and the wounded bandit was struggling to shove a

fresh paper case into the chamber with badly shaking hands. Madigan brought the sword down on Rolf's head, ending another wretched existence.

Devlin had spied his dropped pistol and was reaching for it with his uninjured hand when Madigan simply lopped it off at the wrist.

In trained hands, the Caspian blade was faster than it looked.

Only a few seconds had passed. Five men were dead or dying. The one with the leg wound was a noisy one, but that sent a message to the crowd. Many of the other low-life scum had pulled their weapons, but the example had been set, and none of them felt like risking their lives on behalf of the Thornwood Blades. The bandit leader stared in shock at his severed hand lying among the spilled food and broken mugs before slowly sinking to his knees. Madigan turned his attention back to Sergeant Cleasby.

He was surprised to find that the young man was actually a capable fighter. Cleasby had been attacked by three of the Thornwood Blades. One was lying on the floor, moaning, with a stab wound through the guts, while Cleasby was holding off the other two with a rapier. He fought quickly and efficiently, like a man who had some proper dueling instruction, and the only reason it wasn't over yet was because a gentleman's tutor would never spend time teaching how to take on multiple wastrels whose individual swordsmanship wasn't fit to butcher a cow. Cleasby had ingrained skills, but he wasn't used to combating savagery.

"An upper-class man." Madigan shook his head as he righted a chair and sat down next to the stunned Devlin. "That explains his incredible lack of common sense. What say you, Devlin?" There was no answer. The bandit was still staring at his hand, the fight in his belly having escaped along with much of his blood. The grey of his skin and his shallow breathing suggested he would pass out in a few moments. "I suppose I should help him." Madigan reached down, pried Devlin's fingers off the repeater, and took up the gun. He picked one of the remaining bandits, carefully centered the front sight between the bandit's shoulder blades, and pulled the trigger. The gun roared and the man went down.

Cleasby took advantage of the last fighter's momentary distraction and ran him through the heart. That bandit made a surprised, almost embarrassed face before going limp and sliding to the floor. Cleasby looked nearly as surprised as the bandit, but at least he retained his sword.

Devlin was whispering something, so Madigan returned his attention to the bandit leader. "Speak up, man."

"Took both my hands . . . If you're takin' me alive, you better do something quick."

"Nobody wants you alive, Devlin. I only offered to arrest you because you were kind enough to buy a down-on-his-luck swordsman a drink."

"S'pose I should've surrendered, then . . ."

"I suppose." Madigan lifted Devlin's repeater, cocked the hammer, and put the bandit out of his misery.

Cleasby was panting. The way he stood so long over the body of the man he'd stabbed, watching the red puddle spread, told Madigan this was probably the first life the young soldier had ever taken. *Better get used to it, lad.*

The tavern was dead quiet. The man with the leg wound had quit screaming. The smell of blasting powder mingled with other assorted unpleasant smells. "Anybody

else have an issue?” Madigan waited to the count of five. “Very well, then. There will be no more attacks on military convoys in this area. Living here in this godforsaken farrow wallow, you may think you’ve been forgotten by the kingdom, but you’re still Cygnaran subjects, and you’d damn well better act it. King Leto’s soldiers protect your miserable lives every single day. Do not think you can deprive the men who defend you the tools they need to survive and not face the consequences.” Madigan got out of the chair, took another patron’s mug of ale, and finished it. Sadly, it was watered-down swill. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Sergeant Cleasby!”

To his credit, the young soldier snapped out of his stupor. “Yes, sir!”

He kicked Devlin’s corpse. “Carry this body outside and put it on the back of your horse.”

“My horse, sir?”

“I don’t want to get blood on mine.”



Sergeant Kelvan Cleasby had a cold, uncomfortable lump in his stomach as he rode along beside the infamous Hugh Madigan. Between the cold fog of the mysterious Thornwood, his traveling companion’s nefarious reputation, and the fact that he’d just stabbed someone to death, Cleasby was feeling a bit nauseated. The dead body pushed up against his backside and hanging over both sides of his horse, flopping about, wasn’t helping either.

“Well, it seems we’ve got a bit of a journey ahead of us. We’ll take the Bramblerut Road to Corvis and then a long train ride to Caspia.” It was the first time Madigan had spoken since reading the message. They had been riding for nearly an hour, and the only sound had been the slow clop of hooves. “How’re you feeling, Cleasby?”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“You don’t need to lie to me. The last time I saw a man’s face that shade of grey he was a Cryxian. Disgusting undead monsters.” Madigan hawked and spit on the ground. “So that was the first time you’ve taken a life.”

It wasn’t a question. “That was the first time I’ve seen combat, yes.”

“Combat?” Madigan smiled. “Heh . . . That’s a quaint notion.”

Cleasby felt his cheeks burn. Madigan had a foul reputation, but his martial skills were never in doubt, only his character. “Lieutenant Madigan, I meant no—”

“It’s fine. You can die just as easily at the hands of a good-for-nothing thief as you can leading a magnificent cavalry charge that bards will write songs about for generations—or slipping and hitting your head getting out of the bath, for that matter. You did well in that fight.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Even though there wouldn’t have been a fight to begin with if you hadn’t been a sodding idiot. I wanted them to lead me back to their hideout, where we could have

swept up all of them at once. As it is now, we'll have to make do with killing their leader, but the rest of the gang will reform, thanks to your inability to pay attention."

Cleasby bit his tongue. Madigan was the one who had thrown away a promising military career. No superiors wanted Madigan under their command, no officers wanted to serve alongside him, and no men wanted to follow him. Of course, he should expect rudeness from the man who had outright murdered one of King Leto's best friends. "Won't happen again, sir."

"Don't they still give lessons in reconnaissance at the Strategic Academy?"

"I didn't go to the Strategic Academy."

"Westwatch, then?"

"No, sir." Cleasby swatted a mosquito that had landed on his cheek.

"Hmmm . . . interesting. An enlisted man, but obviously educated, with good breeding. Absolutely no common sense, no combat experience, and too young to have been in long, but already a sergeant. Your father must be a fairly rich man."

"My father was a cobbler." Promotions could come along for things other than a strong sword arm or steady aim with a rifle, but men like Madigan wouldn't understand that. Cleasby happened to be very good at preparing and expediting vitally necessary reports and paperwork. "Actually, until recently I attended the University of Corvis."

"A scholar? Well, that's handy, I suppose. I met Viktor Pendrake on his travels. Good man. Learning everything he could about monsters and beasties and how best to deal with them. Fascinating, useful information."

"I only took the required introductory class in the Department of Extraordinary Zoology, so I never studied with Professor Pendrake."

Madigan turned on his saddle, looking honestly disappointed. "What *did* you study then?"

"History and classical literature, mostly."

"Morrow preserve us." Madigan let out a long breath. "That explains a lot."

"I did go through the officer training program, sir. And in my defense, your . . . *operation* among the local criminals was rather unorthodox conduct for a knight."

"I wasn't given that title because of my courtly skills, Cleasby." Madigan chuckled. "I was knighted because King Vinter thought I was especially good at killing things."

"Is that why you sided with him during the coup?" Cleasby immediately regretted saying it. Sometimes his mouth had a bad tendency to run before his mind was done deciding if things were better left unsaid.

"What was that?" Madigan pulled on his reins and brought his horse to a stop. Cleasby wasn't as good a horseman, and it took him a moment to get his mount under control. When he had wrestled the horse about, he saw Madigan was giving him a cold stare, not too different from the one the man had been wearing before he'd started chopping up bandits. "If you've got something you want to say, spit it out."

"I . . . I meant nothing by it, sir. I've just heard . . ."

"What've you heard?"

"Just soldiers talking. When I was told to fetch you, some people may have said a few things about your . . . history."

"History, eh?" Madigan scowled. Cleasby realized the grizzled knight's eyes were an eerie shade of blue, nearly the color of ice. Cleasby's horse took a few nervous

steps and snorted. The dead man's damaged arm swung forward and bumped Cleasby's boot heel. "I suppose you found my history fascinating, then? A little personal glimpse into the minor events surrounding the Lion's Coup?"

"No, sir! I—"

"So these *people* of yours told you about what I did to Earl Hartcliff?"

By "people," Cleasby had meant the officer who had given him this message to deliver and then every other officer in the command staff of the 2nd Division he'd spoken with. The details differed, but the point remained the same: if you wanted to have a career in the Cygnaran Army, avoid Madigan like the plague. There was nothing to be gained by serving with the man who had butchered King Leto's childhood friend during the coup and had remained remorseless about it ever since, but rather than say all that Cleasby only nodded.

"Listen carefully, Sergeant. Vinter Raelthorne was our *king*. I followed his orders then exactly like I follow King Leto's now. When a soldier gets orders, he doesn't question them; he follows them. Right now my orders are to go with you to Caspia." Madigan forced a smile that was almost worse than the glare. "So relax." Madigan made a clicking noise with his tongue and his horse obediently set out back down the road.

Cleasby realized he'd been so tense he'd stopped breathing. He thumped his horse with his boots and they followed along. The Thornwood was eerily quiet.

Half a mile later, Madigan addressed him again, but this time he didn't bother to turn around. "I've been away from the chain of command for so long I wasn't sure anyone even remembered I was still alive. What else did they tell you about me? And consider answering that question truthfully as a direct order from a superior officer."

"Well . . ." He swallowed hard. He had been given quite an earful. Driving his blade through someone's ribs had been easier than this. "They said you're bad luck."

"How so?"

"Wherever you go, bad things happen."

"Maybe I have a knack for knowing where trouble is going to be and getting there first."

"They say you cut corners, break rules, get your soldiers killed." Madigan jerked his head just a bit at that last one. "That you're without honor, compassion, or any other knightly virtues. That the king is remarkably merciful for not executing you. Let's see, what else . . . You're a sorry excuse for a knight . . . you—"

"You are a remarkably honest man, Cleasby. That's admirable, if somewhat stupid."

"Uh . . . thank you?"

Madigan raised one fist. "Hold up."

Cleasby managed to stop his horse faster this time. The knight was carefully watching the thick underbrush. "What is it?"

"Shhh." Madigan tilted his head to the side, listening.

Cleasby couldn't hear or see anything different. His horse seemed jittery, but Madigan's horse was fine.

"Dismount and cut that body loose," the older man said.

"Whatever for?"

"Remember what I said about following orders, Sergeant Cleasby?"

"Sorry, sir," Cleasby grumbled as he dismounted. Leather creaked as his horse

stomped nervously. It took him a moment to untie the knots in the rope securing the corpse, and by the time he looked up from his work, he was surprised to see a gigantic, heavily armored ogrun standing in the middle of the road. “Bandit!”

The beastly figure had to be nearly eight feet tall and was carrying a mace big enough to smash a warjack, and it had come seemingly out of nowhere. Cleasby drew his rapier and then realized the little blade would be next to useless against someone that big and wearing that much armor.

Then the bandit corpse slid off the back of his horse and Cleasby yelped as it fell on him.

The ogrun was watching them with beady black eyes that seemed comparatively tiny compared to his wide mouth. “Your friend is mighty high strung,” he said to Madigan in a raspy voice loud enough to fit his massive stature. Then he turned to Cleasby. “Put the pig sticker away before you accidentally poke somebody.”

“Stand down, Cleasby.” Madigan dismounted as the ogrun approached. “How’ve you been, Hutchuck?”

“You *know* him?” Cleasby asked nervously as he tried to disentangle himself from the dead man, but the corpse had become remarkably stiff and uncooperative.

“No. Hutchuck is a common ogrun name and the old human got lucky,” the ogrun said flatly. “Where did you find this bright one, Madigan?”

“He found me. I’m to be transferred to Caspia.”

“Good. With you gone, the fort will go back to being lazy, patrols will slack, and crime will go up. More bounties for me to collect means more gold to buy alchemical supplies for my experiments. Everyone is happy.”

“*You’re* an alchemist?” Cleasby was incredulous.

Hutchuck ignored him and turned to Madigan. “They will let *you* back inside the City of Walls?”

“I was never officially banished.”

“Close enough.” The ogrun’s armor rattled as he shrugged. It seemed to be made up of bits and pieces from various other suits—most of them too small—and even metal scraps and plates torn from ’jacks. He was wearing a bandolier which held several very large, roughly fashioned grenades. Cleasby felt even worse when he realized someone that heavy and that explosive had managed to sneak up on him. “They say there will be war there soon, against the Menites. They are smart to bring you back. War is all you are good for.”

“You’ll get no disagreement from me on that. Come on. I’ve got what you want.”

Hutchuck stomped over to the corpse. He gave Cleasby a suspicious look before kneeling and pulling the burlap sack from the bandit’s head, revealing the face. The ogrun growled—a low, dangerous sound—then pulled a rolled piece of paper from inside his breastplate. It was a wanted poster. He looked at the picture, then the body, then back at the picture. “Hard to tell. You humans get puffy when you die, but the beard is right.” He pried open the dead man’s mouth with two giant fingers. “Bad teeth, too.”

“As big as that reward is, it should buy you plenty of corrosive reagents to keep you occupied for a while. It’s Devlin. You’ve got my word.”

“The monetary value of your word couldn’t buy a goat anywhere in Cygnar.” The horrendous bellowing noise that came next had to be ogrun laughter. Hutchuck

removed a large coin purse from his belt and tossed it to Madigan. “Always a pleasure doing business, my friend.” The mace went over one shoulder, and then he effortlessly picked up the corpse in his other hand, carrying Devlin by the belt like a piece of luggage. “Farewell, Madigan. May you have a very good war.”

“Until next time, Hutchuck.” Madigan stuffed the bulging coin purse into a saddlebag, then climbed back onto his horse as the ogrun walked in the opposite direction. “Come along, Cleasby.”

He waited until the mighty brute was out of earshot. “What was that?” he demanded, even though he suspected he already knew the answer.

“A mutually beneficial transaction. Military officers can’t collect bounties; Hutchuck’s trade is bounty hunting. So Hutchuck gives me half up front, I bring him the body, and then he goes to the fort and collects the whole reward.” Madigan didn’t seem even the least bit ashamed. “No use letting a perfectly good dead bandit go to waste.”

“That’s against regulations!”

“Which is why I used the ogrun.”

“But . . . but *regulations!*”

Madigan didn’t seem interested in explaining himself further. “Mount up. We’ve got a train to catch.”

Offended and angry, Cleasby followed. He didn’t want to disobey orders, and he certainly didn’t want to be caught on the road in the Thornwood alone after dark. When he’d first heard the rumors about Madigan, he’d thought maybe, just maybe, they were exaggerated, but now he wasn’t so sure. This man was supposed to be a knight? Where was the dignity and the honor like he’d seen from the command staff in Corvis? Those knights had been models of chivalry. Surely, none of them would seek out personal profit for doing something that should be done simply out of duty. Such a lack of propriety was disgusting.

Cleasby knew he could be idealistic at times, but Sir Madigan was proving to be as bad as everyone had made him out to be.



Cleasby watched out the train window as they approached the biggest structures he had ever seen. The capital of Cygnar was one of the largest cities in Caen, a magnificent testament to the greatness of their people. It had been the only city in western Immoren never to fall before the Orgoth invaders, and it had only grown more impressive since. He had read much about it, but this was the first time he’d actually seen Caspia. It hardly seemed possible, but the city was even better than he’d imagined.

The first thing he noticed when approaching Caspia was the walls. They were ancient and overwhelming. He’d been taught they were two hundred feet tall in places,

and some were a hundred feet thick. To the east, on the other side of the great bridge that spanned the Black River, rose even more great walls, painted white and gold.

That was Sul. It had originally been the eastern slums of Caspia, but the worshipers of Menoth had taken it during the civil war and named it after their rebellious Hierarch Sulon. As a historian, Cleasby was giddy. This place was absolutely filled with history.

The train entered Caspia's north gate, and Cleasby looked around eagerly, drinking it all in. Great walls reached up everywhere, seemingly without order, creating dozens of separate neighborhoods and districts. People had even built *into* the walls. As for those people . . . Cleasby had never imagined so many people in one place.

"It is absolutely wonderful," Cleasby spoke his thought aloud.

"Indeed." His reluctant traveling companion, Lieutenant Madigan, was watching out the same window. The two of them hadn't spoken much over the last few days of the long train ride. Cleasby had passed the time rereading the few books he'd packed, while Madigan had spent the days visiting with the civilian passengers and sleeping a lot. "Caspia is as beautiful as she is merciless."

"We're living during a revolution of industry, and this is the center of it all. I've been told Caspia is growing at a rapid pace. There are over a million residents now."

"First time in the capital, Cleasby?"

"It is, sir. I'm to be stationed here. Headquarters, 33rd Battalion."

"The 33rd? That's Storm Lance heavy cavalry." Madigan sounded suspicious; Cleasby suspected the man didn't regard him very highly. The feeling was mutual. "You didn't particularly strike me as a horseman."

It had been a long journey, but they were too close to their destination to bother getting offended now. "Can't say I'm much inclined to the horses, sir. I can stay atop one provided it travels in a straight line, and not too quickly. I believe I'm needed for an administrative post."

"Is that why you joined the military, Cleasby? Administrative duties?"

"Of course not . . ." The young soldier hesitated. "That's where my superiors felt my talents would be of the most use, sir."

"I'm not degrading it, lad. It's a necessary assignment, as any soldier who has ever been in a unit with bad logistical support can tell you. Campaigning is bad enough as it is, but it's worse on an empty stomach and without proper boots. Every unit needs an organizational man, but nobody signs up for a war effort to shuffle paper, especially a young scholar with a university education and no shortage of prospects in society." Madigan absently scratched at his scar. "So why did you enlist, Cleasby?"

"Does it matter, sir?"

The old knight's ice-blue eyes seemed to bore a hole in Cleasby. "I say it does."

The truth would sound stupid, so he said what was expected of him. "Because I felt it was my patriotic duty. The kingdom needs every able-bodied adult in this time of need."

"Of course." It was odd how Madigan could go from seemingly uncaring to focused interrogator in the blink of an eye. "And what else?"

Cleasby sighed. He was resigned to the idea that Madigan would simply laugh at him. "This." He reached into the pack on the floor beneath his feet, rummaged around, and came out with a small, leather-bound book. He handed it over.

Madigan studied the book for a moment. "*Records of Chivalry?*" He opened the