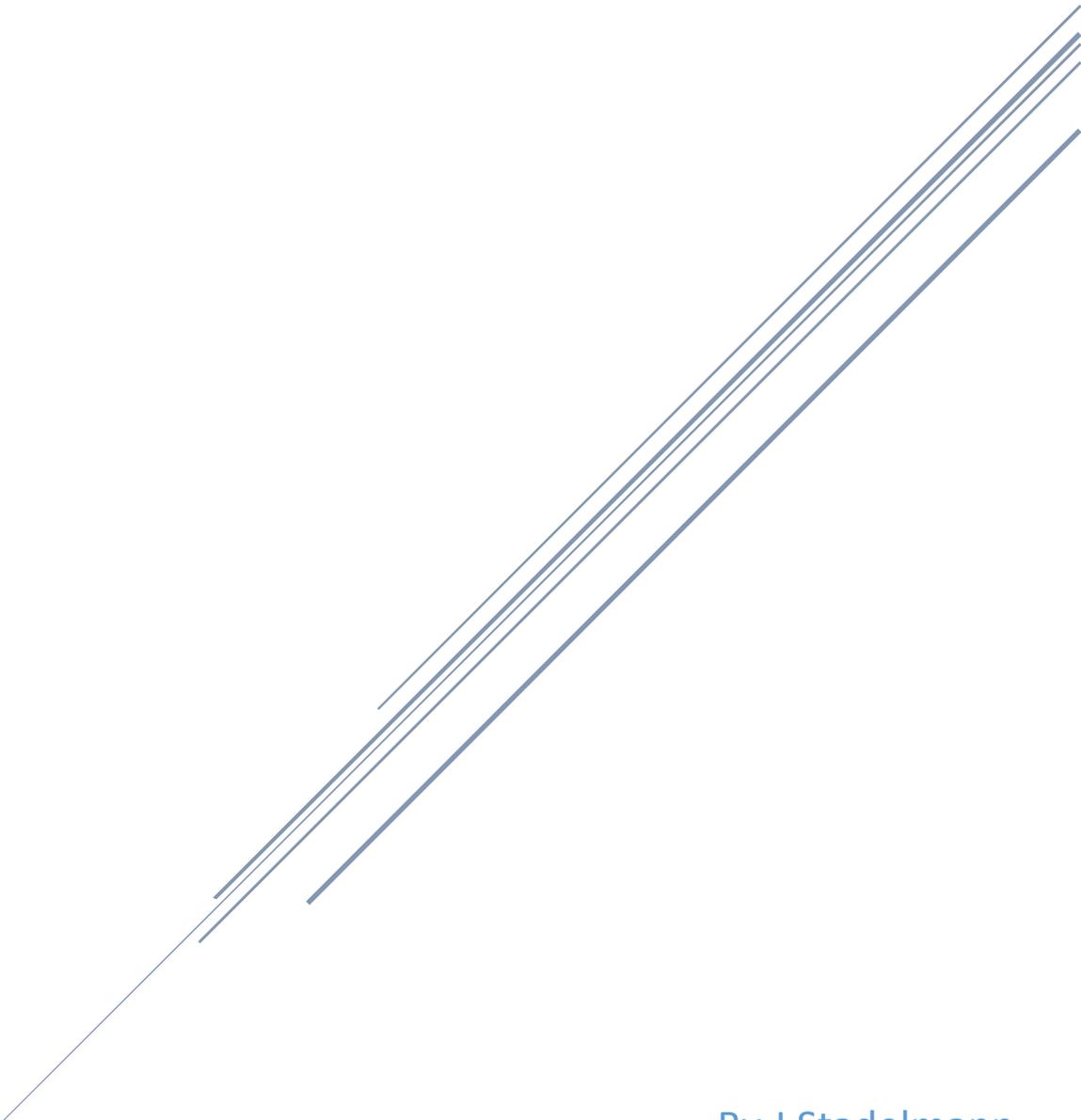


TRUE SON OF THE EMPIRE

Sample Chapters



By J Stadelmann

Foreword

Thank you for downloading the sample chapters of my novel, True Son of the Empire. I've decided to release the opening of the book, free of charge, to give you a chance to see if you like the book as a whole.

This version of the sample chapters, released September 5th, 2014, is part of the crowd-funding campaign. I am raising money to complete and publish the rest of this book. If you've enjoyed what you read here, and would like to see the rest of it, details of the campaign are available at <http://www.jstadelmann.com/>.

Please enjoy the first four chapters of True Son of the Empire!

Chapter 1

Naria seethed and wondered whether she would really miss Lenna if she leapt across the carriage and strangled her. “I thought you said they would help us!” she yelled over the wheels clattering on the steep mountain road.

Lenna was Quaraldim, one of the nomadic elves. Her skin was dusky, and dark chocolate hair was sheared at her jaw line. The tapered points of her ears protruded from behind the straight locks. She was lounging sideways, one foot wedged on the far wall to keep her balance as they headed uphill. Golden eyes stared out the window. She had the lackadaisical air her people displayed when lost in thought, a bored hunting cat in the sun. She shrugged. “I said we could go to them for help.”

“But they might turn us down?”

Lenna closed her eyes, apparently enjoying the beam of sun that washed over her face. She nodded.

“But we’ve come so far!”

Lenna slowly turned her head. She looked to be about Naria's age, somewhere circling twenty. That put the elf in the range of two hundred years old, and as she stared at Naria, the difference tumbled out. "Effort and result are two very different things."

"I know," Naria sighed. "I just ... I'm tired of doing this."

"I know," Lenna agreed, closing her eyes again.

Already feeling like a little kid, Naria stuck out her lip and pouted for a bit. It didn't really help. She glared at Lenna, who hadn't had to dress up today. The elf wore a sleeveless leather shirt that didn't cover her midriff, leaving the tribal black tattoo on her arm and its partner on her stomach exposed, and riding pants, belted with a purple sash. Naria desperately wanted to be wearing something so comfortable.

Knowing they would soon be reaching their destination, it had been decided that morning she would wear her princess costume to make a good impression. Her objections had been ignored with surprising enthusiasm. The ice blue gown, a perfect match for her eyes, had been removed from its chest on the back of the carriage. Despite the creases and wear from travel, it was deemed suitable by people she was now certain hated her. Lenna had taken her down to the brook by their campsite, and forced her to bathe in the frigid water. She shivered while her supposed friend brushed her obsidian hair to her shoulders. With help she had squeezed into the torturous dress. It was designed to perfect her form, but it attacked its task with unnecessary vigour. The whale bone corset made it difficult to breathe. The skirts were too voluminous to move with the graceful speed Naria was accustomed. She plodded along, trying to hold up the hem to keep the dirt of the forest from staining it. It left her shoulders and the upper part of her chest bare, leaving far less to the imagination than she would have liked.

Six inches taller than Naria, Lenna looked down at her while painting her heart shaped face, looking at a canvas, not a person. A silver circlet was fastened across her brow, and Lenna nodded, proud of her work. Naria felt like a doll. The resentment had grown throughout the day, and it was starting to boil over as the sun began to dip.

Smoothing her skirts, Naria glared across the carriage. “They better help us.”

Lenna didn’t open her eyes. “Or what?”

“They just better.”

“I think that tiny crown is going to your head.”

“I think it’s probably the fact that I haven’t been able to breathe since you laced me into this prison.” She tried to stare out the window, biting the inside of her lip. The spruce raced by. She couldn’t find the same sense of detached peace the Quaraldim was managing. “Lenna?”

Naria waited for a slight nod. “Who are they?”

“The Order of the Dreamer?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re warrior priests. That’s the best way to describe it.”

“And they’ll be enough to finish what Gabe started?”

“They’re also Nephilim.”

“Oh.” Naria fidgeted in silence, listening to the clomping of the team, trying to stay calm. She couldn’t stay still. She felt her forehead crinkle, feeling an itch under her skin. There was more that Lenna was keeping from her. “What happens if they don’t agree to help us?”

Lenna sighed. She sat upright, despite the slope they travelled on, and leaned forward. She locked eyes with Naria. “When we go to them, they will pick a side. If they don’t decide to help us, they will decide to stop us.”

“Oh, good,” Naria said through a practiced smile. “A last ditch effort. As long as we’re on familiar ground.”

Outside the carriage, three squads of soldiers rode in escort. They wore the Sunburst livery of the Solarian Empire, a yellow circle ringed in tiny triangles, on a sky blue background. The carriage was in the centre of the column, which was struggling up the steep slope. Scouts kept trying to ensure the slope could be managed, but it remained rough going, and they often had to stop and rest the animals.

The thick spruce on the sides of the road threatened to gobble up the pathway. Sunlight struggled to pierce shrouded in murky gloom in slender blades marked with airborne dust. Nervous riders kept seeing shapes fleeting through the branches, shadows that caught the corner of the eye and then vanished. The horses were becoming increasingly skittish. Every strange sound caused heads to jerk, or people to gasp, or mounts to whiney. Warbling cries of unfamiliar birds set teeth on edge. Far from home, not a member of the column was certain what sort of beast could lunge onto the road.

When a scout returned, announcing he had found the settlement a mile ahead, a ripple of relief flowed through the soldiers.

At long last, the slope flattened out. The forest subsided as the dirt road led to a plateau. A short distance away, the stony shore of a mountain lake was lined with log cottages. The lake itself was fed by an enormous waterfall, thundering down a craggy cliff face on the opposite side. The foam churned at the base, and ripples created tiny waves that caressed the rocky shore. The setting sun stained a grey sky with blood-soaked orange. They started to ride towards the village on the shore. A handful of figures emerged, and jogged forward to meet the soldiers.

The warriors from the settlement were uniformly clad in steel breast plates. Their left arms were braced in steel, but the right were bare, each showing the same strange sort of tattoo that marked Lenna's arm and stomach. Strapped to their backs, each carried three javelins. They seemed utterly unconcerned to be staring down sixty mounted soldiers.

A blunt faced young woman, no more than seventeen, with short blonde hair stepped forward. "Who speaks for this column?" she demanded.

Captain Tyman rode forward. "I do." There was soft sheen of sorrow across his face.

"Why are you here?"

"We wish to petition the help of the Order of the Dreamer."

"I am Vey-Mara-En," announced the girl. "Follow me. I will show you where to set up camp." She led them away from the town, onto an open space on the plateau. The Sunburst column visibly deflated. The thought of solid walls around them, real roof over their heads, and maybe even real beds, were dashed. She nodded to an area, with circles of round rocks demarking fire-pits. There was a stack of split wood near a chopping block, more than enough to get them through the night. The soldiers dismounted and shuffled like sleepwalkers through the familiar routine of making camp.

The driver of the coach, a tall man in the same Sunburst livery, clamoured down and opened the door. He grinned crookedly as he offered a hand to help Naria down. She screwed an unimpressed look on her face, but took it out of fear of stumbling and dirtying the dress. She waited for him to assist Lenna.

"If they kill us over ... over this," she gestured at the dress, "Then I want you to remember it was your idea."

Lenna smiled, and they headed to the nearest of the fire pits, to wait for it to be lit.

A short distance away, in the circle of evergreens which circled the campsite, members of the Order of the Dreamer clung to the shadows and watched the soldiers. Vey-Kalis-En walked up beside his sister, the woman who had led the soldiers in, and looked over at the bustling activity. He was only a bit taller than her. Even at twenty-two, he looked like he had been carved from stone. The sun had already begun drawing hard lines on his brow, and around his mouth, and bleaching his short blonde hair until it was nearly white. He wore the Order's uniform, the breast plate and the spears, but also had a broad sword and a bladed mace strapped around his hips. He watched in silence as the strangers went about their mundane business.

"We're their last hope, Kal," Vey-Mara said softly.

"We're a lot of people's last hopes," he grunted. "The problem is, we're only so many of us."

"There's at least one Nephilim among them. I've told the others to stay in groups of three."

Kalis-En nodded. "Probably best for apprentices. Send for a couple more full members. I don't want to be on my own down there if they've got tricks up their sleeves."

"Are you scared?" Vey-Mara grinned.

"I'm always scared," he answered evenly. "I just don't let it stop me."

Vey-Mara watched her brother walk alone towards the centre of the camp. She whispered at his back "Stay safe."

Kalis-En walked through the Sunburst soldiers, and each one he past stopped working. Eyes followed him, appraising him. It would be foolish for them to attack him, and they must have known they were surrounded. Still, if they came at him en mass, it didn't matter how many apprentices saw, he would still die at their hands. In the Hills of Ruin, trust was a valuable

commodity, and those who gave it to freely suffer dearly. He didn't need to trust they wouldn't hurt them. He did trust they knew they would die if they attacked him, and that was enough.

In the centre of their encampment, he found Captain Tyman. A few years Kalis-En's senior, the man hadn't been born with a soldier's build, but had earned it, tight muscle piled on a small frame. Shocks of red hair peaked out from under his helmet, and he kept rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Like the rest of the Solarian soldiers, he wore a mail shirt under his tabard. He carried a long sword on a belt. His triangular shield and lance were still strapped to his saddle. The captain was busy pounding a tent peg into the ground. Kalis-En cleared his throat.

The captain turned suddenly towards him. "Yes?" he squeaked slightly, a little surprised to see Kalis-En. "Who are you?"

"I am the Emissary of the Dreamer. My name is Vey-Kalis-En. I will hear your plea."

Tyman glanced over his shoulder. Kalis-En followed his gaze. There was the young Solarian noble, worse for wear, a cute girl with a splash of freckles across her nose. Beside her was a Quaraldim, trying not to look stern. Kalis noticed the Glyph on her stomach a moment before he felt the pressure in his temples. Her Glyph started to glow slightly, and Kalis-En pushed out the encroaching head-ache. He felt the heat building in his own Glyph, his arm feeling warm, like the start of a sunburn. He exhaled through his nose, trying to push her out of his head before she got in. She looked away, affecting an air of innocence. She nodded slightly to the Captain.

"Alright," Captain Tyman said, "What do you want to know?"

"Everything. I need to know what you need, and if we can help you."

"What do you know about Gabriel Durihan?"

“Nothing.” There was a look of surprise from the soldiers, who were gathering as quietly as possible around the fire. “News doesn’t travel well here. Nothing reaches us quickly.”

“Start at the beginning,” the Quaraldim said as she approached. “They’re more likely to help us if they know what Gabriel was trying to do. Remember, the details are important to them.”

The captain nodded. The column was not his, that much was sure. He was just their mouthpiece. Kalis-En looked at the Quaraldim, but her golden eyes revealed nothing. He motioned to a series of simple benches, planks nailed to stumps, joining the nearest fire pit. He settled himself on one edge, next to the flickering flames one of the soldiers had lit, and motioned for Tyman to sit across from him. A few other soldiers moved in, surrounding the elf, and the young noblewoman as they took seats beside each other. Tyman glanced at them, and the Quaraldim nodded. He thought for a moment and began to speak. “Raval was a small village, little bigger than the one on this plateau.”

Chapter 2

Tyman

Raval was a small village, little bigger than the one on this plateau. It was on the southern edge of the Grand Region of the Solarian Empire. Low, fertile plains, carpeted in golden grain, eventually gave way to an uninhabited forest. The only reason Raval hosted an Imperial Garrison was to ensure that bandits, thieves, or other unsavoury characters did not make their homes in the woods. We were a single squad of Imperial Lance, twenty strong. It was only Lance, instead of Army, so that fewer soldiers could serve a larger area. I was just a lancer, then. We patrolled the region on horseback, ensuring the years of security continued.

A squad is led by a Captain, and most Captains are officers from Noble Houses, who train at a military academy. Very few are common soldiers, like myself. The posting to lead the squad for Raval is only ever for one of two types of officers. The first was like our last Captain, Ellen of House Risald. She had been a minor noblewoman who had been far better suited to military life than politics. She had spent the last thirty years doing her duty diligently, and we considered it an honour to serve under her. She collected her yearly stipend, drilled her soldiers

well enough, and enjoyed the rest her long career had earned her. When she passed quietly in her sleep, about two years ago.

When Raval isn't a retirement post for some Captain enjoying the last years of service, we're a first post for a fresh officer. That's how Captain Gabriel of House Durihan had come to us, straight from the Academy-By-The-Lake, in the Lacrean Region.

"Wait a moment," Kalis interrupted Tyman, "I'm not familiar with your Regions. I've never been that deep into Solaria."

"Regions are basically the countries that once were," Tyman said softly. His voice was high, and a touch reedy. "Grand Region was Solaria before the Empire. Lympia, to the east, is now the Lympian Region, and they're usually lost in the bottom of a bottle. Lacrean Region was once Dulac, and they're a touch barbaric. Gyptia was the home of the First Dynasty, but they became more concerned with Deos fanatics than earthly politics and lost their Empire for it."

"So Regions have kings?"

"No, they have Regional Houses, which are led by a High Governor, who handles local affairs, and a High Senator, which handles their affairs in the capital. Then the Regions are divided up into Districts, which have their own Governors and Senators."

"So Durihan..."

"Was from a District House."

"Was he a Governor or a Senator?"

"Neither. I believe his mother was their Governor, and he had older brothers. Third son, so he had joined the Imperial Lance."

"Thank you," Kalis said.

Tyman watched him for a moment, confused. Then he realized he was supposed to get on with his story. “Captain Durihan was much different than Captain Risald.”

Captain Durihan was much different than Captain Risald. She had come to us with a wagon full of luggage, a householder husband, Gerald. Together, they had a home in Raval village, where they could entertain their occasional visitors. Captain Durihan, meanwhile, arrived wearing his full plate and starburst tabard, with a basic military kit on his mount, a warhorse from House Durihan’s own stables he called Wayland. He didn’t even have a pack horse, and had apparently come directly from the Academy as soon as he received the posting.

He had refused to take Captain Risald’s old house, in part because Gerald hadn’t yet made arrangements to return to the Risald District in Gyptia. Fesril, our sergeant, set him up with quarters in the Raval Lance compound, an officer’s room which hadn’t seen use in Captain Risald’s command, which held little more than a bed and a desk. Captain Durihan was much more hands on than Captain Risald, riding patrols regularly, training and sparring with us, and learning the basics of command from Fesril, who had served Captain Risald through most of her command.

Captain Gabriel Durihan was tall, half a head over most men. He was muscular without being bulky. His dark hair was shaggy, clipped just above his eyes. He had a careful, close shave. He fought as easily in his heavy armour as he did outside of it, and was completely at home on a horse.

One major change from Captain Risald, however, was that Captain Durihan avoided the paperwork she had relished in. I still remember the day when he learned I could read. A messenger had arrived from Caer Feira, the seat of House Feira, whom ruled over Raval.

Nodim, one of our outriders, a happy man who would have never left the saddle if he hadn't had to, came running in with the rolled up scroll. "A message, sir," he announced, as he came through the mess hall towards the table where we were eating.

Durihan sighed and looked over at Fesril. "Can you look after this?"

"Yes, sir," he said with a nod of his grey head. He rose to meet Nodim, and took the scroll. Then he handed it to me.

I broke the seal and unrolled the scroll. Durihan looked shocked as I scanned it quickly. I don't even remember what it was about. The Captain stood up in his seat and asked "You know your letters?"

"Yes, sir." I replied.

"Solarian?"

"A touch sir, not well. Enough to act as our scribe after Captain Risald passed."

"The Blessed Tongue, then?"

"Yes sir."

"How'd you come by that?"

"Before I was a lancer, I was going to be a priest, sir."

"That's a switch. How'd you go from serving Deos to serving his Excellency?"

I looked away. "I failed at ... at certain vows sir."

"Really?" Captain Durihan asked with a grin. "Who was she?"

Tyman paused in his story, choking back a quick sob. Kalis-En leaned forward, his weapons clattering against his breast plate, watching the Lancer carefully.

“Is it alright if we let him skip this part,” Naria asked. Kalis and Tyman both started as they looked over at her.

Kalis watched her carefully. Naria’s eyes flicked over to Tyman, who was staring into the dancing flames. She flashed Kalis a sad smile and shrugged sympathetically. “Gabe spent a lot of time in Raval. He got to know the people there, and he knew who cared about who. He was teasing Tyman.”

“So it isn’t important,” Kalis nodded.

Naria laughed. “No, it was important. It was very important,” she watched Tyman, as he collected himself. “But we don’t need to get into that right now. What you need to know is that Gabe realized Tyman used to be a priest, but wasn’t, right?”

Tyman nodded, coughed a little, and continued, his voice wavering just a little. “The Captain was overjoyed to learn I could read and write.”

The Captian was overjoyed to learn I could read and write. “Listen, Tyman,” he told me. “I like the idea of you acting as scribe. If I helped you a bit with your letters, would you be willing to continue on?”

I am not above admitting that being scribe had kept me out of some of the less pleasant duties when Sergeant Fesril had been leading us between captains. Avoiding latrines and late watches had a certain appeal. So I soon found myself at Captain Durihan’s side constantly, reading and writing his letters for him, filling in his ledgers, and generally ensuring he had to spend as little time as possible with written words.

I spent the next year working with him, and most of what we did was uneventful. We patrolled the empty countryside, confirming it was empty. We sent in our reports, drilled, and I learned my Solarian letters. We were all surprised when it changed.

Chapter 3

“And that’s when you think he was possessed?” Kalis-En asked.

The Solarians stared at him. Finally, the girl in the blue gown asked “What? Why would he be possessed?”

“Because we came to him, Naria,” the Quaraldim said softly. “The Order of the Dreamer hunts demons. If we need their help, we need it with demons, and he’s searching our story for them.”

“They’re tricky,” Kalis-En explained when the elf went silent. “But the more you know about them, on how they’re holding onto our world, the easier they are to send back to their own. Usually, they’ve possessed something, whether it’s man or beast. It’s simpler when it’s a beast, like a Cerebrite, a possessed wolf that grows two extra heads. It gets twisted to be viscous and deadly far beyond any natural creature. They aren’t subtle, and they don’t hide. A few quick spears and a bladed mace to the spine and the problem was solved. But I’m guessing your demon is worse.”

The girl nodded.

“So when did you notice that Gabriel started acting weird.”

“He’s not the demon,” the elf said.

“Can you be sure?”

“Reasonably sure, yes.”

Tyman nodded. “Do you want me to skip ahead to the demons?”

“No. They probably slip in before you realize they’re there. Just keep going, and hopefully I’ll find what we’re looking for.”

“Captain Durihan was sparring with Denma when the messenger arrived.”

Captain Durihan was sparing with Denma when the messenger arrived. She was the best sword-arm amongst us, and I’m not just saying that. She had learned to sweep him off his gangly legs at any chance. It was actually pretty funny, because she felt so bad, but it worked so often she couldn’t afford not to. A young lancer from Caer Fiera arrived, and he often carried messages, so he brought me the sealed letter, and watched the sparring, knowing I would read it before Captain Durihan.

I broke the seal, and began to read the official orders:

Fourth Day, Middle Moon of Spring, in the 36th Year of Lukas,
Fourth of his Name

To Captain Gabriel Durihan, Raval Garrison of His Excellency’s
Lance,

You are hereby ordered by Commander Elizabeth Camant of His
Excellency’s Lance to report, with your Garrison, to Caer Feira.
The length of the engagement is at this time unknown. Make the
necessary arrangements with any local militia and Constabulary.

You are to report by Twentieth Day, Second Moon of Spring, to
Commander Camant in person. Send confirmation of receipt of
these orders with returning messenger.

Lady Elizabeth of House Camant, Commander of His Excellency’s
Lance, True Daughter of the Empire.

Denma's dull practice sword clattered to the ground. She would only beat Captain Durihan about a third of the time, usually because he overswung and she stepped in and took his legs out under him. He was always getting better, and he currently favoured knocking her sword clear. She spent about an hour each day trying to find new ways to stop his disarms.

"Captain!" I called from the edge of the practice yard. He looked over at me, waving the orders. He went to Denma's fallen sword, and with the tip of his own practice blade, he flicked it up, right by the crossbar, and caught it by the hilt in his left hand and handed it to her. Then he came over, and took the papers from me, and read them carefully.

"Tyman, get me Sergeant Fesril," he said when he finished.

"Is it bad, sir?"

"Go," he sighed, and I ran off. I found the Sergeant behind the mess hall, and brought him back to the Captain. Durihan never made a major decision without consulting Fesril, as he considered the old man's years of service better than anything he had learned in the Academy-By-The-Lake. Durihan waited until we were close, and when he felt no-one could overhear the three of us, he said to Fesril "We've got orders to take everyone, absolutely everyone, and report to a Commander Camant in Caer Fiera."

Fesril glanced at the letter, which he couldn't read, and nodded.

"Why aren't these orders coming from Majer Fiera?" Generally, we reported up to the son in law of High Lord Luther Fiera, Majer Jonathan Fiera.

"I don't know sir. But we can't ignore a Commander's orders, for the sake of a Majer."

"I know. I know." He took off the padded practice helmet and ran his fingers through his hair.

"We have to go, sir." Fesril explained. "Chain of command."

“Won’t we be leaving Raval undefended?”

“From what? The trees? The wheat? She’ll be safe and waiting for us when we get back, Captain.”

“What if there’s a war?”

“There probably is. That’s why we’re needed elsewhere. There’s more than enough old veterans, and young, healthy kids who didn’t make the cut to join the garrison that even if things go south and trouble finds its way to the middle of nowhere, they’ll be safe enough. Raval will be fine, and waiting for us when we get back”

“Fine. Rally everyone. Send Nodim out to recall the patrol, and we should be able to leave by the morning.”

“Also gather two weeks rations for everyone,” Fesril added.

“Caer Fiera isn’t that far away, and the letter doesn’t say anything about supplying our own food.”

“And when we get there, we’ll ensure we’re on the list with the quartermaster. I apologize sir, but I would prefer to bring food with us we don’t need, instead of go hungry.”

“Should we bring more then?”

“No sir. His Excellency wouldn’t starve us, but sometimes there’s not enough to go around to keep everyone full. We should bring extra for ourselves. We can easily take it without overloading the mounts, and it’s better to have too much than too little.”

“What would I do without you, Fesril?”

The older soldier smiled. “Starve, probably.”

“Wait,” Kalis interrupted again. “Why did Fesril answer to Captain Durihan?”

“He was our Captain,” Tyman said, confused.

“Yes, but why wasn’t Fesril the Captain? He seems better suited for it.”

“Captain Durihan was a Lord, with Officer Academy training.”

“And he didn’t know basics about provisioning? Why put him in charge of Fesril?”

“It’s not a meritocracy,” the Quaraldim interjected. “Your family name is generally what makes you an officer there. Tyman is an exception, and very few Lancers become commissioned officers. Lords and Ladies never start as rank and file troops.”

“Why not put the best in charge of things. It shouldn’t be about a family name.”

“Is that so, Kalis-En?” She leaned heavily on the last syllable.

Kalis reassessed the elf, sitting lazily in the fading firelight, staring out across the lake, a sheet of orange water. She met his eyes for a moment, flicked up a little smile, and then looked out across the water again.

“You can’t judge a man by his ancestors.”

“An entire empire to your west would disagree.”

“Each man should prove his own merit.”

“And the advantages of birth can prepare a man for that, whether it’s the build he inherits from his father, the education the rich can buy their sons, the superior armour a noble family can put their officers in, or whatever ... advantages a family can provide.”

Kalis felt his anger rising. He swallowed and returned his attention to Tyman. “So, you rode to Caer Fiera?”

Tyman watched the elf for a moment, who watched Kalis ignore her. Finally, she nodded, and the soldier continued. “It took a day to get ready, and another three to ride to the district capital.”

It took a day to get ready, and another three to ride to the district capital. We were a full squad of twenty and their untested captain, who took subtle orders from his sergeant. We found an army waiting in Caer Fiera. Outside the granite walls of the city proper were even, neat rows of tents, filling the fields around the city. Lancer horses were corralled, supply wagons well-tended, and a tension drifted off the regimented waiting going on ahead. There were maybe fifty full squads of the Imperial Army, foot soldiers with large square shields, sturdy boots, and the willingness to march for days for His Excellence. Our squad brought the total Lance up to twenty squads or so.

Normally, we would have reported to Major Jonathan Fiera, and taken our place within the other forces he commanded. However, with our orders, we needed to find Commander Elizabeth Camant instead. We left the rest of the squad to water and care for the horses as Captain Durihan, Sergeant Fesril, and I headed towards the banner of Commander Camant. Her field office was set in the middle of the camp, a set of three interconnected pavilions which could have held thirty men. She flew the Imperial Sunburst from a pole in the centre, largest tent, and just below it was her House's pennant, a silver crescent moon on a black background. The area around her command tent was clearer than we expected, with the nearest row of tents near her set back at least one hundred feet.

There was also a rather large regiment of guards for a commander in Imperial territory. Large, blocky members of the Army watched carefully, garbed in immaculate sky blue uniforms with the Solarian Sunburst on the center. She had a full squad of twenty, in groups of five around her tent, posted on each side. Each had a massive square shield, wood lined with iron for common soldiers, with the Sunburst painted on it as well. They held spears, and each had a short

sword on his belt. In the event of trouble, these giants would close ranks, shields together, spears out.

We approached the entrance to the tent, which had three guards on one side, and two on the other. “Captain Gabriel Durihan, Raval Garrison, Reporting for duty.” One of the giants saluted the Captain, and then walked into the Camant’s tents. We stood there, watched by the remaining for soldiers. They kept appraising us like potential threats. Normally, a member of His Excellency’s Starburst is happy to talk to another, even across services. I’ve never known a man on guard duty to be so disinterested in speaking with new arrivals. We waited patiently, in uncomfortable silence. Captain Durihan whistled to himself. Fesril adjusted his belt. Finally, the guard who had gone inside returned, and motioned with his head that we should go inside.

We entered a large cloth room. Carpets had been laid down on the grass. A few wooden chairs, which could be folded up, sat in front of a collapsible pine table, with legs that could be unscrewed in when they broke camp. Poles driven into the ground between where the carpets met held oil lanterns. While everything was portable, it is not what I expected as a mobile command centre. The cloth room felt too permanent. I would guess it took an hour to set up, as long to dismantle, and two or three wagons to move the Commander’s tents when they broke camp, especially if the other rooms were this well-furnished.

Commander Camant was a severe woman, who had a heavily lined face for her thirty years. Pale blonde hair, shot with a few streams of grey, was pulled sharply back from her face. She had her long sword on the table, next to the papers, orders and maps she was going through, unsheathed. She seemed ready to use it at any instant. Her eyes skimmed over Fesril and me, and she seemed nearly unable to see anyone of low blood.

“Captain Gabriel Durihan, and the Raval Garrison, reporting for duty, sir,” he said with a salute.

She nodded, and her fingers flicked quickly through a stack of papers, deftly pulling out one by feel. Her dark eyes skimmed it quickly. “Your posting in Raval, relatively recent, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir.”

“How have you found your new garrison?”

“They’re my first, sir. They’re good people.”

“Disciplined? Loyal?”

“Certainly, sir. I’d put my life in any of their hands.”

“Good. We’ll be here until the Twentieth day of this moon, as the rest of the squads the region can spare are called in. Rest your soldiers and your horses. I’ve a few things that still need cleared up with High Lord Fiera, and then we march towards Caer Sinder.”

“Normally we report to Majer Fiera, sir,” Gabriel said. Fesril hid a subtle shake of his head.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

“If I may, sir,” Fesril interjected, “What the Captain is asking is, where in the camp do we set our tents?”

The Commander stared at him, as though seeing him for the first time, measuring up the Sergeant. Still watching Fesril, she addressed Durihan. “Is that so, Captain? Is your sergeant correct when he presumes to speak for you?”

“He is sir.” Durihan explained. “Sergeant Fesril is my right hand.”

“Your right hand is your right hand, Captain, and hands don’t speak.”

The Captain glanced uncomfortably at Fesril, and then to me. “Of course, sir. If I may ask one additional question.”

“Fine, Captain, but make it quick.”

“What are we doing there, sir?”

“Quelling a rebellion.” She looked at him, as if to ensure she was serious, and then motioned us out of the tent.

We returned to the squad. Without any answer from the Commander, Fesril led us to the edge of the camp, and declared this was where we would set up for the night. As soon as I had separated from the officers, Denma was beside me. “What happened?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I told her.

“Nothing my ass,” she whispered. She was always worried someone else would hear her swear. “You look like they ran your dog through.”

“I really can’t tell you.”

“I can’t see why. Sooner or later someone will. What does it matter if I know now?” She was starting to get angry, and her pitch was rising. It was more trouble than I needed to keep a secret which, she was right, she would know soon enough.

“There’s a rebellion in Caer Fiera.”

“What? Why?”

“Not our concern,” I told her. “Our job is to serve His Excellency’s will.”

Twenty minutes later, Nodim came up to me. “Is it true?”

I sighed. “Is what true?”

“Caer Fiera. Is there a rebellion?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Denma.”

“Damn it.”

“So it is true.”

“You didn’t hear it from me. Or her.”

Everyone knew I was the source, and before long my indiscretion had the entire squad whispering amongst themselves. We were surprised, because we had heard nothing of a rebellion in Caer Sinder, and it was less than three days ride away. By the time an army was gathered, we should have known something about it. We argued, very quietly over whether we were there to prevent one, or if Caer Sinder was just a rally point and they were headed to some distant province deep in Gyptia. Before too long, someone must have asked Captain Durihan about it.

It was late afternoon, with us gathered around the cook fire to make sure we would be amongst the first to eat, when he arrived. “I understand,” Durihan said as he approached, “That you’re all worried about this rumour of a rebellion.” He righted a toppled log with his boot, and hunkered down on it. “I doubt it’s anything to worry about.”

“Why not, sir?” Fesril asked. He had a lot of family in Caer Feira.

“Well, it can’t be close to here, or we would know something about it already. We’re at a muster point, not a battle. Nothing is happening here.”

“Are you sure, sir?” Denma asked. I felt myself holding my breath.

“There’s an explanation. There has to be.” Durihan rubbed his hands together and held them out towards the fire, even though it was a warm evening. “We just have to wait until Commander Camant shares it with us.”

He did not say anything more on the subject, and there was something calming in his certainty which seeped into all of us. By the time he left us, we were considerably more comfortable. He headed off to the Officer's mess, nearer the centre of the camp just after sunset.

When he returned a few hours later, he bore a rather dark look. He nodded at me as he passed and called "Tyman, with me." I jumped up and followed after him. I don't believe I had ever seen him in such a foul mood. We walked through the Raval tents until he saw the Sergeant. "Fesril," he called, and we headed into his tent.

When he had arrived in Raval, he hadn't brought an officer's pavilion with him, but Captain Risald had left one behind, and Lord Gerald hadn't minded passing it on to Captain Durihan. We had made him a pennant with the Blue Sword of House Durihan, down thrust on a white field, and it hung below the Sunburst. His pavilion was much smaller than the Commanders. He had a basic bedroll against the back wall, a fire pit dug out in the centre, and a small board for letters. His plate was in a dark lacquered chest in a corner. Fesril had tried to convince him to bring a stand, and Durihan had said it could just sit on a blanket when he wasn't wearing it, so they had compromised on a chest in one of the supply wagons. He had a few of little stools, about a foot off the ground, and he gestured to us to sit as he lit both a small lantern and got the fire in the pit going.

Angrily, he poked at the fire with a stick and added more wood. When the end caught fire, he smashed it into the ground to put it out. Finally, he related what had happened that evening.

Earlier, he left us and joined the officer's mess, set up under a long awning near the field office of Commander Camant. Unlike the soldiers, who ate around the fires, the officers, sons and daughters of noble houses, had collapsible tables with attendant benches that were loaded

into the main supply train of the army. These were set up, and simple ceramic bowl and durable tin utensils stored by the mess crew in padded cases were used to serve their meals. He had grabbed a full bowl from one of the mess crew at the serving table and searched for a table of younger officers.

He joined another captain near the edge of the awning, several feet away from anyone else. The man was very neat, with close cut dark hair and a closer shave. He had a narrow nose, and seemed to slowly watch his surroundings in sweeping gazes. His uniform and boots were spotless, and the metal identifiers pinned on the shoulder of his dress uniform tunic indicated he was a Lancer captain, not an Army Captain.

“Hey. I’m Gabriel Durihan. Mind if I join you?”

The man sized him up and then nodded. “I am Albert of House Klienket, son of Jordan.”

“Klienket,” Gabriel asked while sitting. “Is that a District or a Regional house?”

“We were District, but the Emperor recognized my father’s service ten years ago when House Culeas turned traitor.”

“Hadn’t heard about that,” Gabriel said between mouthfuls. “Seems like there’s a lot of that going around these days, eh? People turning against His Excellency?”

“How so?”

“Well, the Commander told me we were headed out to stop a rebellion.”

“Is that so?” Klienket said, and then leaned in, adopting a hushed tone, “You sure you want to sit with me?”

Captain Durihan leaned in as well. “There a reason I shouldn’t?”

Klienket nodded. Durihan shrugged, and kept eating. Klienket looked around, to ensure no-one was listening. “I have two squads serving me, and we were part of the patrols around

Caer Solaria until about two months back. In Winter's Last Moon, I got the orders that I was reassigned to join Commander Camant. So we transferred to her, and started marching this way immediately. She had about half the forces you see here when we left the Capital. Every city we passed along the way, she would stop and see the High Lord or Lady, and demand a few squads. We didn't wait for them, just left orders that they were to follow us to Caer Fiera. I didn't think much of it, just a marching muster.

"When we arrived, it was at the end of First Moon of Spring. We started setting up, before the Commander even presented herself to the High Lord of House Fiera. She waited a full couple of days, setting up the encampment, sending letters back towards Caer Solaria, but never presenting herself to High Lord Luther. Finally, the Majer for this district road out."

"Majer Jonathan of House Fiera," Durihan supplied.

Klienket nodded, and looked like he was memorizing the name. "He came out and met with Camant. After he left, she started stationing an Army squad around her tent. Majer Fiera came back every day or so, and they would meet, and he would always leave angry. We started having drills to run, right in the path Majer Fiera would walk to come see Camant. Basically, she made sure he had to come through a battlefield, every time he arrived. To his credit, each day, Major Fiera just walked around the mock battles."

"This went on for about three weeks. I never did hear what he kept coming to see her about, but one has to assume it has something to do with a display of aggression for them. Then, one day, when walking by the drills set out to discourage him, Majer Fiera took an arrow in the leg."

"An accident?" Captain Durihan asked him quietly.

Captain Klienket didn't answer, just continued on with his story. "So the next day the Captain rides out, bandaged leg, in full plate, with two squads in Fiera livery. He had a bishop with them, and they had an official looking letter, like they were there to arrest Camant. They rode through the drill and directly to Commander Camant's tent. Her Army guard formed up as soon as they approached, but Commander Camant let them in to her pavilions without a protest, unarmed and friendly like no one had seen before.

"They were in the tent for about an hour, and then Majer Fiera came out, and asked his squads to return to the castle. He looked miserable, but the soldiers obeyed and left. Majer Fiera went back in to Camant's pavilion, and shortly there-after, every majer throughout the encampment was called in. They were in there the rest of the day. It was a court-marshal."

"They found him guilty of something?" the Captain asked.

"Of course they did, Durihan. Don't be naïve." Klienket pushed his bowl away, looking a bit sick to Durihan. "The next morning, my squad was given the 'honour' of being part of the official escort. We took five squads in all, mine, another Lance, and three Army. All of us were from Caer Solaria, and had been with Camant since we left the Capital, and the Army Squads were from the group of five squads that rotated in guarding her tent. We mustered around her banner an hour after dawn."

"Majer Feira was led out of the tent by one of the Army soldiers. He wore a dress uniform, but with no badges of office pinned to the shoulders. His hands were tied in front of him in coarse rope, and the soldier minding him pulled him along like an old dog on a leash. Dried blood stained his lips. He kept his eyes down."

"The Commander was in full plate, and she mounted up, and took the leash from the guard. She rode in the centre of our column, with the other Lance squad in the front and mine in

the rear. We rode to the gates of Caer Fiera, and they opened wide for us. The Commander looked at one of the gate guards and ordered ‘Go and fetch High Lord Luther Fiera, and bring him to the Southwest Square.’ Then we continued on.”

I’ve been to the Southwest Square of Caer Fiera. The square is built around Sacred Oak Chapel, which faces to the north, with the sacred oak in a raised, fenced garden in the centre of plaza. The other sides are all filled is surrounded by townhouses, leaning in close together.

Klienket told Captain Durihan, “Commander Camant had us clear the centre of the square, moving the growing crowd to the edges, until they were lined up four deep against the houses. The Army squads formed around the Commander, who led Majer Fiera up by the tree, where everyone could see him. My squad formed up on the east side of the square, and the other squad formed on the west. Then we waited, for about an hour.”

“High Lord Luther’s carriage finally came into view, rolling down the cobbled streets, flying his Red Flame on Black. He was accompanied by what must have been the majority of his House Guard. They all wore Fiera, not a single Sunburst amongst them.” If you know that square, you would know that Fiera’s House guard could easily have taken out Camant and her force there. The Sunburst would have made them pay dearly, but eventually Fiera would have their heads.

“When his carriage came to a stop, one of the Army captains rushed forward, and handed him a copy of the court martial through the window of the coach. Commander Camant cleared her throat, and pulled another copy from her tabard and read out to the assembled group that ‘Lord Jonathan of House Fiera, Majer of His Excellency’s Service, Protector of the District has been brought before a court of The True Children of the Empire and Officers in His Excellency’s Service on five counts of Treason, one count of Conspiracy, one count of Desertion, and one

count of Assaulting a Superior Officer. On all accounts he has been found guilty.’ The Commander returned the letter to her tabard, and stood behind Majer Fiera. She kicked the back of his legs, forcing him to kneel. Then she nodded to the church.

“Out came a Holy Father, swinging a censor before him. Behind him, a man dressed in executioners black came with a heavy executioner’s sword, six feet of sharpened steel, balanced over one shoulder. Under his other arm he carried a thick log. High Lord Luther came out of his carriage, and started screaming at the Commander. It was almost incomprehensible, just pure rage. His own forces blocked his path to the square, ensuring his safety. The Commander’s guard moved aside to let the executioner through. The Holy Father, shaking, knelt beside the Majer. He asked the Majer if he had anything to confess, and the Majer let out this long, pitiful screech.”

“Camant had removed his tongue. He couldn’t speak. The priest looked up at the Commander, who shrugged with a mean little grin. The priest called out, ‘Someone bring this man a pen.’”

“The Commander glared at the priest. ‘That won’t be necessary. Jonathan has nothing left to confess. Isn’t that right?’ she said down to the prisoner. He closed his eyes, squeezed out a tear, and nodded. The Holy Father stumbled through the Last Rites, and then retreated back into his church as quickly as he could. The executioner secured his stump under the Majer’s head and looked at the Commander.”

“Camant looked over at Luther, who was red in the face, who had yelled himself hoarse and was now glaring through his own tears. ‘This is what happens to those who defy His Excellency’s will!’ she shouted, and nodded to the man in black. The executioner rose his heavy

blade and brought it down on Jonathan's neck. The sword bit deep into his neck, and he kicked twice before he became still. The headsman swung again, to remove the head entirely."

"So there we were, trapped in the square, having just killed the Majer who was the main military mind in the city, and enraged his father-in-law. I was certain we would be fighting our way out of that square, but someone on Caer Fiera side kept a calmer head than their High Lord. His carriage departed, and the House Guard started lining the streets, creating this corridor of death for us to march out through. They could have pincerd us, and slaughtered us all, on our way out of the city. Commander Camant just looked at them, lining the streets to the city gate, and smiled, like they were children playing in the streets."

"So we rode, my squad now in front, towards the gate, waiting for them to rush us. But they stood there, glaring, mostly at the Commander, and let us leave in peace. When we cleared the city gate, and were back in our own camp, I dropped back to the Commander in the middle of the column. 'Sir?' I asked and she nodded to me. 'Should we be preparing for an attack from the city?'"

"She shook her head. 'House Fiera has learned their place, I think.' I rode beside her for a moment, not sure what to say next. She glanced over at me. 'You seem concerned about what happened, Captain.'"

"I nodded. 'A little sir.'"

"She pursed her lips and said 'We can easily arrange your own court martial, if you are so concerned.' I told her that wouldn't be necessary, and she dismissed me. Since then, I've been something of a pariah, as no-one wants to be associated with me."

Captain Durihan finished relating the story, and Fesril shook his head slowly. "Some officers can be a bit tetchy, sir."

“Tetchy, Fesril? She just had a man’s head cut off.”

“After a full court martial with all the majers present. It seems as though she had the right.”

Gabriel sighed heavily, but didn’t voice a disagreement. He rubbed the back of his neck, and said, “There’s something else that’s bugging me,” Durihan told him. “Albert didn’t know what happened to the bishop who came with Majer Fiera.” Fesril watched him carefully, and deflated when the Captain smiled. “What do you say we find out?”

Chapter 4

Tyman

Captain Durihan sent me to retrieve the original orders we had received to come to Caer Fiera. We stored them in a little waterproofed box on one of the supply wagons, and I rushed through the twinkling light of all the watch and cook fires with my own torch. I flipped through the papers we had brought, maps and charters, commendations and demerits for our soldiers, anything anyone might need to take over the unit if something happened to the Captain. I checked each in the sputtering light of my torch, until I found the letter that brought us to the edge of Caer Fiera, and ran it back to the Captain's tent.

As he looked over it, he smiled. "There's the key, Fesril," he said, pointing to words the Sergeant couldn't read. "The Twentieth. We had until the Twentieth Day of Mid-Spring to report."

"Yes sir," Fesril nodded noncommittally.

"It's only the eleventh today."

Fesril nodded again.

“So, if she was going to march the troops hard, do a very quick breakdown of the camp, and head to where we’re heading, we wouldn’t be leaving before the Twenty First. We’ve got some time.”

“Some time to what, exactly, sir,” The Sergeant finally asked.

“I want to know what Camant is really up to. I want to have a look around her tent.”

The Sergeant rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know about this sir. I doubt the Commander would take well to finding us searching her tent.”

“Well, then, Fesril, we’ll just have to make sure we don’t get caught. This shouldn’t be too bad. Didn’t you ever sneak into any of the instructor’s rooms at the Academy, to go through their papers, see what they were testing you on, that sort of thing?”

“Sergeants don’t go to the Academies, sir.”

“Right. Right.” Durihan started to stand, to pace while he thought, but realized there wasn’t enough room and sat back down on his stool. “Okay, maybe I need help from someone who’s done this sort of thing before.”

“Insubordination?”

“Deos, Fesril, this is far less harmless than that.”

“What will the Commander think if she finds out? Don’t you think there will be grave consequences?”

“No. I mean, it isn’t espionage.”

Fesril stared at him. “You’re just spying on your senior officer, to determine if she’s doing something you disagree with, without her knowledge?”

“Maybe,” the Captain shrugged.

“Sir, what does espionage mean to you?”

“I’m not another country, Fesril. I just want to know.”

“And what do you want to know, sir.”

“I think the Bishop is still in her tent. And if he is, I plan to get him out of there.”

“I didn’t realize you were so faithful, sir,” I said.

“Hmmm? Oh, it’s not about that. I don’t really like what I’m hearing about Camant. It doesn’t matter that he’s a bishop. It matters that she has him.”

“Are you sure about this sir?” Fesril asked.

Captain Durihan studied the Sergeant. “What do you mean?”

“This sort of insubordination, it seems like the sort of thing that got Majer Jonathan beheaded.”

“So we can’t let the same sort of thing happen to anyone else. We need to make sure she doesn’t have any other prisoners to mistreat. If she doesn’t we walk away. If she does, we do what needs done.”

“If you think it’s necessary, sir.”

“It is. Tyman,” he called over to me.

“Yes sir.” I jumped up. My spine felt tight, and I wanted to be done with whatever we were about to do.

“I need you to find Captain Albert Klienket, and bring him here.”

“Yes sir.” I rushed out of the tent, and quickly realized I had no idea where to find Captain Klienket. So I went from watch fire to cook fire, with the same question. “I have a message for Captain Klienket. Where would I find him?” I would have been more worried, but in a camp that size, messengers always get lost. Two or three had come during my own supper, asking where to find this captain or that majer. It took about half an hour, with each answer

getting more specific, from “Somewhere to the north” to “those tents just over there.” After I knew what I was looking for, I found myself squinting against the night at the standards of each squad’s small avenue of the hastily assembled tent city. I found the right banner, three red stars on dark blue. I called from outside his tent, “Captain, are you awake?”

A muffled voice came from inside. “Who’s there?”

“Tyman, a lancer. I have a message.” I waited a few moments, and Klienket came out with his trousers and tunic on.

Captain Klienket looked me over carefully. “Well? Where’s the message.”

“Sorry sir. It’s not a letter. I’ve been sent to see if you would come see my captain.”

“And whom would that be, Tyman.”

I looked around to ensure no one was in earshot. I figured we weren’t supposed to be too loud about what we were doing. “Captain Durihan, sir.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, an exhaled deeply. He stepped back into his tent, and emerged with his sword belt. As he looped it around his waist he said, quite loudly, “We should probably go for a walk.” Then, much quieter, “Take me to Durihan.”

I did as I was told, avoiding the larger concentrations of troops and fires whenever we could. When we passed a fire, we would nod at the troopers there, who jumped to attention from near sleep and saluted. Finally, I reached Durihan’s tent, and held the flap open so he could enter.

“Gabriel,” Klienket said, shaking his head, “I’ve got to tell you, I’m a touch concerned about all this cloak and dagger.”

Captain Durihan smiled at him. “Don’t be. It’s barely any cloak, and no dagger.”

“What do you want,” Klienket asked as he took one of the stools.

Durihan spoke slowly. “Right now, I want to look around Commander Camant’s tent. I want to see what’s going on in those back rooms.” Captain Klienket’s jaw dropped as he stared at Durihan. Durihan shrugged and laughed. “It’s just like sneaking into an instructors office at the academy.”

Klienket shook his head. “I never did that.”

“Really? I thought everyone did that. I just want to take a quick look around.”

“No you don’t. You’re looking for something. What are you worried you’ll find?”

“I want to know what happened to the bishop. You didn’t tell me what happened to him.”

Klienket shrugged. “Because I don’t know.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

He looked at me, and then at Fesril. Durihan nodded that we could be trusted. “It didn’t seem prudent. I was in enough trouble.”

“The bishop may be in more. From what you told me, no one saw him leave Camant’s tent.”

“Well, no one mentioned it to me, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t. He could be easily back in his cathedral”

“He could easily be stuck in that tent.” Durihan said, shaking his head. “Albert, we can’t leave that to chance.”

“I don’t think you’ve thought this through. If he is in the tent, he’s in His Excellency’s custody, in care of Commander Camant. If she has him in the pavilion, it’s because that’s where he’s supposed to be.”

“And you believe that?”

“Gabriel, don’t forget, she had all the majers present when she court martialled Majer Fiera. She only needed three. You may not agree with her, but she hasn’t done anything wrong.”

Captain Durihan’s jaw started to flare. “Hasn’t done anything wrong? Do you truly believe that?”

Captian Klienket just stared at the ground in front of him.

“She cut out a man’s tongue, for Deos’s sake! But because she had a trial first, you’re just going to let that pass?”

Klienket raised his eyes, angry now, and met Durihan’s. “Alright, Gabriel, let’s think this through. Say you go in there, and you find that Commander Camant is holding the bishop. Somehow, you’re able to determine that she has no right to do so. What’s your next step?”

“I get him out of there.”

“How? Can you do it without insubordination, without deserting? She’s the most senior officer here. You swore an oath to obey His Excellency’s Orders, at all times and in all places.”

“Do you really think His Excellency wants his officers cutting out tongues and kidnapping priests? Let’s do what the Emperor would want, not what Camant tells us.”

“You’re going to look like a deserter.” Durihan waited in silence. Klienket watched him and continued. “They’ll have you beheaded if you’re lucky, but probably strung and quartered. You’ll be a criminal, and every soldier here will be after you. You can’t defy her so openly.”

Captain Durihan stared at him in disbelief. He had been certain Captain Klienket would help him.

“Gabriel, this is going to lead to your death. You’re committing suicide. Forty lancers couldn’t stop this army.”

“We don’t need to stop this army. We just need to get the bishop clear of it.”

“There’s another way. One that doesn’t lead to us and our squads dying as traitors, trying to hold off legions of the Sunburst. We don’t know Commander Camant has actually done anything wrong. So we keep our eyes open, do as we’re told, and watch for signs. Gabriel, if we stay with the army, if we follow orders, and cause as little harm as possible, we can carefully watch for problems. We can minimize any damage. And if we find a problem, we can bring Camant before a General, or his Excellency, and have her stopped for good.”

“Can you really live with that? Waiting quietly until you’re certain nothing is wrong?”

“Yes, Gabriel.”

“Good. You do that. I’m doing the other thing.”

“The one where you betray the army and end up executed as a traitor.”

“Well, when you say it like that, it sounds like fun.” Klienket shook his head. Durihan saluted him, and he returned it. “Best of luck. If I go missing, that’s your first sign something is wrong.”

“Then I hope to see you soon. Otherwise, I never knew you.” He headed out of the tent. Once it was just us, from Raval, Fesril cleared his throat and said “You know he’s right, sir.”

“With his waiting plan? Really, Fesril?”

“I agree with him sir.”

“And if I decide to proceed with what I’m planning to do?”

“I’m yours to command, sir. I just wanted to let you know, I think you’re planning a mistake.”

Durihan nodded. “Alright. Albert made some good points. We have to be ready to act in case this we do find the bishop. Tyman, get me Nodim.”

I headed out, and roused the outrider, who had just settled down to sleep. He dressed quickly and followed me back to the Captain’s. He shook the sleep out of his head, and stepped inside, saluting before he even saw Durihan. Durihan returned it and said, “Nodim, I’m going to need you to take the outriders, and find me a decent meeting place. Something an hour to the east of the camp.” South was Raval, and west would have been the road back to the capital. The city was directly north, so west was our best bet if we needed to escape.

“Yes sir,” Nodim smiled. “When.”

“I’m sorry, Nodim, but I need you to go tonight. I’ll draw you up the official orders to scout that way, in case anyone stops you.” Nodim raised an eyebrow at this, but let the Captain continue. “I need something off the main roads, that won’t be instantly visible. Something you can put on a map for the whole squad.”

“Yes sir,” Nodim saluted again.

“Go rouse the outriders, and come back in fifteen minutes. Tyman will have the orders with my seal.” Durihan acknowledged the salute, and dismissed Nodim. Once the outrider was out of the tent, he said to me, “The orders should list that I need them to scout east of the encampment. Nothing more specific.”

I nodded and started to write. Meanwhile, the Captain turned to Fesril, who had been waiting.

“I’m going to leave you here, with the squad, when I go to investigate the bishop tomorrow, Fesril. If we don’t come back, we’ll be at the spot Nodim scouted. I’ll need you to

come and meet us there. I'll leave orders similar to the ones for Nodim, but you'll need to be ready to move immediately."

"Why, sir?"

"If anything goes wrong, Camant will be looking for me and mine. I'll be taking Marin with me. If we're gone for more than an hour, or if Marin returns and tells you to head east, you need to be ready to move right away. Twenty Lancers certainly can't take this entire Sunburst."

"Who will you be taking anyone else with you."

"Well, I'll need Tyman. We may have to read through her papers, and it will be quicker if there's too of us. I'll bring Denma with me too, in case there's a fight. I'd hate to have to take twenty Army with just Tyman," He glanced over at me and smiled. "I'll take ten, she'll take ten, and you'll watch the bishop. I'll have Marin waiting nearby, with Wayland and horses for the others and the bishop. I'll also need Althea for a distraction."

"Meanwhile, the rest of us pack up for a long range patrol to the east. Tomorrow you should talk to the quartermaster, and get our supply wagons fully loaded. I recommend we go on this patrol either way. Camant hasn't paid much attention to us, or assigned us to a majer. Our squad is invisible to her right now, and we can use that to our advantage. If we move out either way, it's less suspicious."

"Alright, Sergeant. Make the preparations and I'll prepare any paperwork you need."

"Yes sir"

The next evening, just after the sun had set, the Captain rode up on Wayland, in his full plate armour and Sunburst tabard. His lance was in its holder. Denma, Althea, Marin and I were all in our mail with our own, coarser tabards, and we mounted up beside the Captain. We rode through the wider lanes of the tent metropolis, towards the Commander's central pavilion. As

we got near, the Captain nodded to Althea. She saluted, and rode off, to the North. We headed to a busy corral used by one of the majors five squads of Lance, where an extra set of mounts would not be noticed. We dismounted, and Marin took our reigns, and began to water our steeds. He was to tend them, kept them ready to go, in case we came running.

We were just out of sight of the big area cleared for the command center. Denma walked to Durihan's left, and I walked to his right, both of us a pace behind. We came around the tents, and headed to the entrance of the pavilion. As before, groups of five large Army soldiers stood, facing each cardinal direction, around the tent. We headed towards the entrance. The Captain called out to the guards by the entrance. "Captain Gabriel Durihan to see Commander Camant." The soldier closest to the entrance saluted and headed inside. A moment later, he returned, and held open the flap.

Inside, the Commander sat at the same folding table, her bare sword still by her right hand. We saluted, and she nodded slightly. "Captain Durihan," she said absently.

"Commander, I understand my squad and I arrived a bit early, and there's not much for them to do as we continue to muster."

"Let them enjoy a little R&R, Captain,"

"Yes sir. It's just, I was thinking they could actually do with a bit more exercise. I wanted your permission to ..."

As expected, Captian Durihan was interrupted by the large guard from outside coming in. Durihan stopped speaking and looked at the man, who glanced at him then saluted the Commander. "Sir," he said, "There's an urgent messenger from Majer Courant." Camant made a circular motion with her hand, indicating the messenger was to be admitted.

"Apologies, Durihan," she said, "You'll have to wait."

“Of course, Commander,”

Althea came rushing in. She was huffing and puffing, like she had just run from somewhere while in her full mail. She saluted the Commander, and waited for the Commander to signal her to continue with another absent gesture.

“Sir,” Althea panted between laboured breaths, “Majer Courant, requests your presence as soon as possible.”

“What for, Lancer?”

“She’s spotted signs of a small group of soldiers gathering ten miles to the north of Caer Fiera,” she said. “The Majer has more details, but she sent me as soon as the scouts brought word. She doesn’t think it is dangerous, but wants to speak with you if you are available, sir.”

The Commander nodded and stood. She took her sword from the table and sheathed it on her belt. “Durihan, your request will have to wait. Lancer, take me to the Majer.” Althea shot a quick, desperate look to Durihan. We had assumed Camant would go to the Majer on her own. The Captain made a slight nod, and Althea headed out, with the Commander and her guard in tow.

As soon as the commander left, Durihan rushed over to the table, and began to flip through the papers. He took a stack and shoved it towards me. “Denma,” he told her as he read. “Check the other pavilions, in case he is here.” Denma nodded, and headed for the curtain, serving as a door, on the edge of the room we were in.

She was gone for a short moment before she returned to the curtain. “Captain, he’s here, but there’s a problem.”

Durihan put down the stack of papers he was looking through, and headed behind the curtain, with me a moment behind him.

The next area seemed to be the Commander's main living space. Her plate stood on an armour stand, as well as several lances and swords in a rack. There was a large wash basin, a fire pit, and another collapsible table, this one with a bowl of fruit, a decanter of whiskey, and a few bottles of wine. On one edge of the room, away from everything else, near the wall of the tent, a frightened looking man in a soiled robe sat. There was an iron collar around his neck, locked to a three foot length of chain hammered into the ground with a spike, in a space where the carpets on the floor sat.

“What was the bishop's name?” Durihan asked me.

“No one ever told me sir,” I answered. Denma was shaking slightly, and clenching her teeth.

“Father,” Durihan called out as he headed towards the man. The man snapped his head towards him. His eyes were rimmed in red, and his hair fell in wet clumps around his face.

“Father, I'm here to help.”

“Help,” he whispered. “Help?” his voice raised an octave but remained hushed. “Too late for help. They've crawled in to all the spaces where they don't belong. They're forming nests.”

“Nests, Father?” Durihan asked. He knelt beside the bishop, whose eyes darted around.

“Nests. Of course they have nests. Haven't you seen them slithering around?”

“I haven't,” Durihan said patiently. He reached out to the metal collar. The priest flinched, but then allowed Durihan to touch it. He muttered on as Durihan looked for a way to get it off him.

“If you haven’t seen them, you can’t help. It’s too late for us. We let them into all the empty places, and they built their shrines and now they won’t leave. Now they’ll swallow us whole.”

Durihan sighed. “Denma, come help me with this.” He started lifting the chain, and braced a foot by where the spike had been driven into the ground. Denma headed over, and grabbed the chain as well. The bishop babbled on as they heaved together. On the third tug, the spike, nine inches of iron driven into the ground, loosened. On the next pull, it came free, and Denma and the Captain collapsed, in a clatter of armour.

“Front room!” Durihan hissed. “Now!”

We rushed through the curtain, and stood in a row moments before three guards from outside came clamoring in. They looked at Durihan. “Everything alright sir?”

“Do you know when Camant will be back? I’m tired of waiting. What’s happening in there?” he asked. “It sounds like someone is throwing rocks at armour, knocking it over?” The guards glanced at each other skeptically. “Well, look into it for me!” Durihan ordered.

“Yes sir,” they said in unison. Durihan nodded at us, and we stood aside as they headed carefully towards the curtain. Their curiosity was obvious. Apparently, these guards had not been into the deeper recesses of Camant’s Command tent. By the way they held themselves, they were aware of something, and they knew their questions would soon be answered.

As they passed us, the first soldier moved the curtain aside, Captain Durihan stepped behind the last two. He grabbed both of their heads and smashed them together. The two men collapsed in a heap. The soldier at the curtain turned, whipping his spear around. Denma cleared her sword almost instantly, and blocked the swipe heading for the Captain. The guard turned on her, and tried to bash her in the face with the huge shield on his left arm. She rolled

along the length, spinning and coming to his left side. She stabbed the tip into his armpit, and managed to get under his mail. He cried out in pain dropped his shield, but as he stumbled back, he clamped down, and managed to pull Denma's blade from her.

I was pulling my own blade, but Denma had already squatted down, picked up the shield, and as she rose, she swung with it, catching the guard under his helmet and on the chin. The man's eyes rolled back in his head, and he grunted, and collapsed.

The two other guards from the front of the tent had rushed in. They charged at Durihan, spears out, shields blocking them. The Captain drew, charged towards the collapsible table, and grabbed one of the chairs in front of it. He threw it at their feet, and one man tripped over it. Their charge was so tight, both men fell. Durihan put his sword to one guard's throat, and I rushed over to cover the other. "Get them in the other room! Now!" he whispered.

Denma dragged the collapsed forms by the curtain through, as we hurried the other two men to their feet and took them into the room where the bishop was held. Durihan headed back into the front room while Denma and I held our swords to the throats of the two guards still conscious.

"What's going on sir?" We heard voices from the next room.

"There's a madman loose in the Commander's tent. We're subduing him, but form a perimeter." Durihan ordered. We heard the clomping sound of the army soldiers heading back out. Durihan came back into the sitting area we were in, with a coil of rope he had found somewhere. "Tie them up. Gag them. Then put a helmet and a tabard on the bishop. We don't have long."

Durihan headed back out into the office while Denma and I worked. She smiled at me as we disarmed and tied the two guards we held at sword point. "What?" I finally asked her.

“Four for the Captain, one for me, none for you. Embarrassed?”

“More proud that you managed to take anyone out before Durihan finished them,” I told her. She was always competitive, and reminding her how she could rarely out spar the Captain was enough to end the conversation. We finished the knots and gags, and then went to the bishop. He continued to mumble nonsense as we pulled a tabard over his head and collar. We put him in the helmet of one of the soldiers. We tried to set him on his feet, but he almost collapsed under his own weight. I put one of his arms over my shoulders, and Denma followed suit. We led him into the front room.

Durihan was quickly going through the papers on the Commander’s desk, stuffing them into a leather messenger’s satchel. If he found something that interested him, he shoved it in the satchel. Otherwise, he threw it on the ground. He had made quite a mess, by the time we got there, and looked up at us. “Okay,” he said. These will have to be enough.” He patted the letters and documents in the satchel, and slung it over his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“How do we get him out of here?” I asked

“We just walk. Come on.” Durihan headed out of the tent. I looked at Denma. She shrugged at me, and followed him.

“Is that him, sir?” One of the Army guards asked as we came out.

“It is. I’m going to take him to the brig. Let the Commander know that’s where she’ll find us when she gets back.”

“Yes sir,” he saluted. Durihan returned the salute, and we pulled the bishop along between us. The army guards started milling about, wanting to return to their initial positions, but still waiting for the east facing guards to return from inside. As soon as we were out of sight we ran to where Marin waited with the horses.

“Can you ride, Father?” I asked.

“Do you hear them? Like bees? Everywhere, shaking our teeth with their dull roar?” He answered.

“He’ll have to ride,” Durihan said. He started to feed the chain through the collar of the tabard, and then wrapped it around the bishop’s waist. Then he boosted him up onto the spare horse before mounting his own. “Let’s go before the Commander returns.”

We all mounted up. The bishop, in a tabard and helm, looked like a wounded lancer. Durihan took the lead, and Denma and I flanked the priest, hiding him and his ramblings from the camp as much as we could manage. Marin took up the rear, full of questions, and more than a little nervous that we had a man for the spare mount. We hadn’t told him much about what we were doing. Just that we may be taking someone with us to the rendezvous. We rode, quickly yet causally, to the edge of the camp. No one bothered to stop us, and we weren’t really that odd of a sight for a camp this large. As soon as we were clear of the outer sentries, we rode as fast as the priest could manage, cantering down the highway.

Afterword

Thank you for your interest in True Son of the Empire. If you've enjoyed what you've read so far, there's a few things you can do to help me out, in order to make this book a reality.

First and foremost, please donate to the campaign. Details for this campaign are available at <http://igg.me/at/jstadelmann>. If you donate \$5 or more, you will receive the next few chapters of the book early as a reward. If you donate \$10 or more, you'll receive a complete copy of the book when it is published. I appreciate any and all donations to this project, and even a \$1 donation helps me make my writing dreams come true.

Even if you can't donate yourself, it's a huge help if you can help me generate interest in the book. Please feel free to pass this document along to anyone you know who may be interested. The bigger the audience for this book, the easier everything becomes.

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Thank you!