



Part One: By Royal Decree

Chapter One

They would get them soon enough. That, to him at least, seemed inevitable. Watching across the barren lands that stretched beyond the outer walls of Benanz, Harak Maar grinned with that thought turning slowly around his mind. Wiping the sweat from his brow, the droplets flicking across the white stone top of the parapet and dotting them with small dark specks, his gaze fell down upon the lines of men that stood like terracotta soldiers against the mid-morning sun, three hundred men to a unit and two thousand in total. They were fine warriors, Harak Maar had seen that to be true from his first meeting with them, but that was long ago now, and the hoard had lost over one hundred men since those days.

He grinned again.

These were men who were loyal until a blade pierced them and took them back to the Unuk Kai, or The Ghundi or whichever God they believed in. Looking down on them, he imagined himself pouring a thousand barrels of boiling tar upon them, and yet he was sure they would still stand there without so much as a whimper as the skin flaked away from their bones.

These were men not of war, but men for war. Newly painted red stars adorned their helmets, with many still dripping as the sun baked the paint from the scolding iron crowns.

Silence.

He shivered slightly at the glorious sight before him, and any fear that he may have felt harbouring in the dark recesses of his mind, were swept away in that

moment The smell of burning bodies filled the air, and his eyes fell along the narrow top of the parapets and across the rocky outcrop that leant against the side of the Arac Tower, until at last he saw the dancing flames that engulfed the fallen foes of days ago. The smell brought warm memories flooding to Maar, filling his mind with blood, sweat and brutal murder.

‘Ser, His Royal Highness asks for you.’ Said a low, sombre voice from behind the Commander. He turned, nodding in reply and began to make his way from the outer walls and down the thick, uneven stone stairway until at last he found himself under the cooling shade of the outer court of Arac. Scanning around he saw men busy preparing for the evening ahead. There was a fairly well-organized line of men awaiting to be fed, and the distant lingering muster of ox broth filled the Commander’s nostrils until he gave a quick cough. Too

much pepper, a staple of the Benanzi culture. He kept on still, marching on in the cool air as droplets of sweat ran down his neck and either into his undershirt or onto his breast plate. He didn't care.

The place was large enough to hold almost the entire infantry at the aforementioned 'Royal Highness' command, though many slept in crudely constructed tents outside Arac, in case of midnight raid attempts upon the city, and no less than thirty men kept watch at any given hour to ensure that any such raid would be swiftly dealt with. However, it was not that which had impressed the Lord Commander Harak Maar, but instead the ferocity with which these men fought when called upon. He had seen it first-hand six months previous in the harsh deserts of Benanz. There had been a brutal, savage and unprovoked attack on a small

village on the borderlands of the Aidda Mountains. The villagers, and few of them had any military knowledge, stood no chance. When the messengers from Benanz arrived a few days afterwards they were met with the smouldering remains of the village, along with the skinned carcasses of the village elders. To those who knew the area well, that meant only one thing, and it was without doubt that the terrible act had been carried out by The Snake Men. Soon after, with the returning messengers bringing with them the charred remains of a small village girl, barely five years old and her remains still small enough that they were held in only a small leather pouch that was carried under one shoulder, the decision had quickly been made to not only find those responsible for the horrific act, but to show them as much (or little) mercy as they had shown to the villagers. Passing along the courtyard, eyeing the

ominous silhouette of a bald Eagle that perched high above him, Maar soon entered into a dark tunnel. A stairway, carved from the rock and earth that surrounded him, sent the Commander further into a black hole of cool damp air.

Along his side, at waist height, there was a thin wire that was held tightly against the wall of the descending stairway. Occasionally it broke giving way to thick iron holders that had been driven into the rock. Flickering in the distance, above head and protected by iron brazier, flames whispered in the darkness. Further on and barely audible, came the drifting sounds of sheep-skin drums and oud. Maar gave a sigh at this, already he was able to pick up the tune and know that once again that Teek Najim Al Janut, His Royal Highness of Benanz, was once again instructing the band to play his own

somewhat rugged melodies. Approaching the circular oak doors, the dancing flames of firelight curved the shadows of the darkness around the flowery engravings, Maar was met by two large men. Both wore the same garb, golden silk sashes around their midriff and crisp white shirts which were overlaid with shining mesh armour. They stood silent, staring into the darkness beyond Maar.

'His Royal Highness asks for my council.' Said Maar after a moment of awkward silence, and he fought against the thought to place a hand on his sword hilt.

'We are aware.' Said the taller of the two, his gaze unmoved and his face emotionless. Maar cocked his head slightly and examined the man's war-torn features. They were plain to see. The left eye was clouded, and a mark crossed over both the brow and slid down to his upper cheek. On his neck there was the remnants of a

slavers collar, the skin still red against the otherwise hazel complexion.

'You should not keep His Royal Highness waiting.' The man said suddenly, the clouded eye turning slowly to meet Maar's gaze.

'Of course.' Maar returned after a moment, before pushing against the door and finding it easily, and quietly swing to one side.

Taking a step within, and as the door slowly closed behind him, Maar beheld a glorious sight. All around him the place was lit with marvellous displays of firelight. Large black iron braziers stood against the walls six on each side, and over each one sat a mage who sprinkled dusts and poured liquids into the flames and watched as they turned violent greens, blues and purples. The walls, which behind the finery was bare

smoothed rock, were painted glorious white and the Eastern Wall was adorned with three large murals depicting the rise of Teek Najim Al Janut. Of course, the paintings took certain liberties, unspoken lies, such as the one which showed Teek Najim standing against forty warriors the Klaha tribe with nothing but a small dagger. Maar knew the truth of that story all too well, and it made him smile as he passed the mural with that in his mind. From the West Wall there was hung the tattered banners of the wars Teek had raised and won. Dancers leapt and clapped to the rhythm of the music, and the sound of their bangles echoed around the great hall. The bedlahs decorated in fine golden threads and small jewels, mirrored the firelight beautifully. Jugs of wine, and a large table of fruits, berries and bread stood before the raised platform to where Teek Najim sat atop his stone throne.

'Ah!' he called out 'My friend! Ha! What a pleasure it is to see you today!'

Maar nodded and bowed before the man.

'Ah, come now my friend! Please, come and sit beside me.'

Maar moved between the dancers, the soft feeling of hands against his back made him uneasy. Najim patted a chair beside the throne, and his wide perfect smile part his moustaches and thin beard.

'It is a glorious day my friend. A glorious day indeed!' Najim said as Maar sat, the hall was warm and sweat began to bead on the back of the Commander's neck.

'Of course, my King.' He replied with a smile, forced though it was.

'Imagine it my friend, the sight of them as they run from the battlefield. The sight of them as they scramble

like rats from a sinking ship. I cannot wait to see it!'

Teek Najim smirked.

'Of course, my King. But we must be careful. There have been whispers amongst the Southern villages.

They say they have spotted riders out in the Deern valley.' Maar returned, his eyes meeting Najim's autumn eyes. The King moved forward; his hand shifted softly to fall across Maar's.

'Impossible my friend. They are mistaken, we have had riders across that valley for weeks now and not a single sighting. Besides, those savages don't have the balls to go into that valley. Not with my men down there. They would be foolish to do so.'

'Even so, I suggest we send a force around the Kalak Pass, we can attack them from both sides. If there are any in there, they'll have nowhere to go.' Maar replied,

the sweat began to drip slowly down his back and settled against his buttocks.

'My friend, I have known you for many months now and you have proven yourself almost divine on the battlefield. However, I will not send men to fight an enemy which does not occupy that land. We will march through the valley as planned and take them head on at Kalak Dum.'

'My King, I must stress the importance of the information we have-' but a hand to his face made Maar stop within a second. About them the hall carried on as before, though the dancers gave shocked side glances.

'These reports, they are lies! Lies spread by those who wish me nothing but death and torment! Do you hear me? I will not have my men wandering the desert plains checking every little hole for those scum!' Teek Najim spat as he spoke, his voice lower than before and

carrying with it the full force of the anger within the man.

Maar made no move towards his cheek, now red and stinging, but instead he took a deep breath and returned his gaze outward to the hall. Najim sat back in his throne, his fingers tapping against the arm rest and his other fingering a bowl of grapes.

'When will we set out?' The Commander said eventually.

'This evening. With all the force and might of Benanz at your back.' Najim returned, eyeing the commander curiously.

'Any prisoners?' Maar asked.

The steady tapping of fingers against stone stopped.

'No, I want them all dead.'

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The city was a putrid place. Decaying builds were a rough refuge to those who travelled from further east or those who had come South from the Slaver cities in the North. Poverty was the only asset shared by the common folk, with most owning market stalls where they sold homemade crafts, candles and furniture. They were skilled people, that much was true. A good amount of the younger men was now training under Teek Najim's military academy, all waiting patiently to be posted out to one of the many outposts held under the King's iron grip. For those who failed, if they were not cast away by their families, a hard and poor life awaited them. The blacksmiths offered good work, but little pay, and the shipyards preferred those who could handle a blade should they ever need to do so on the seas. For the women, whether old or young, baking and

crafts were the primary trades offered by Benanzi culture. Of course, there were other, perhaps less well thought of offers, but taxes and bills had to be paid. The streets were wide from the Northern gates, well paved and maintained for travellers and the Royal family. But the true Benanz lay around the corners of the main square with its glorious fountain and marble statues. Here the streets were thin, wiry like the veins from a dead man's hand. The buildings were crooked, worn down by both time and weather and the people were quiet and self-catering. Whorehouses were aplenty in these back streets, often placed at the corners of Inn houses or near to the docks where sea-weary sailors could feel at home once again. Gambling houses were also rife, controlled often by the Lower Nobles, and more often than not by Teren Nakim Du'Waar. A quiet, unassuming man with a wrinkled face and warm eyes,

but with a heart of stone and a cunning brain. There had been several recent occurrences of debtors going missing before reappearing in the mirky docks of the Anu. Most were intact, or at the least identifiable.

Streams of people lined these suffocating streets, and from dawn to dusk the city was full of thousands of voices, cries and laughs as people went about their daily business.

Here, towards the Eastern most corner of the city and nearest to the banks of the Anu River, sat a small girl as she traced her name in the soft slopped sand dunes.

'Parva, what have I told you about sitting in the sand?' Cried a disapproving voice from behind the girl. She sighed, stopped at the final letter and turned to face the woman looking down at her.

'I must practise though mother, if I am to-' But a wagging finger stopped the girl's timid pleading

response in an instant. Looking up at her mother, silhouetted against the sunlight through the upstairs window, she looked almost angelic.

'Silly girl. Honestly, if you're grandma could hear you now, she would give you a good whack like you deserve! Have you checked on the dough like I asked?'

The girl shook her head.

'Ay! This is not good enough Parva! And now you have sand in your fingers as well! What a child, wash your hands and come up here now.'

Parva turned back to her sand-scrawled name and looked at it curiously. The writing was improving, but her 'A's' still needed work. She quickly brushed away at the name and for a moment giggled as the gritty sand tickled at her palm and fingertips. Against her back the wind swept cool, a nice reprieve from the harsh sun that sat high above her unobstructed against a clear bright

sky. Pulling herself and dusting off as much of the sand as she could, Parva Deriam turned back to face her small home. It was a terracotta-coloured building with two large windows, now open but with secure shutters lightly flapping in the wind, at the upper floor and a large wooden door that curved at the top directly below. A small path, crudely placed against the hard earth underneath, led to it and on either side were small undergrown and under-watered bushes and flowers. It was a modest place, a mere shadow of the former glory it had held.

Inside the air was warm and the smell of baking bread wafted around the place. There was strange silence in the house, interrupted only by the chirping of small birds that danced around the rooftops. The small wooden table, backed hard against the wall, sat thickly

coated in flour and dry egg stains and a small wooden rolling pin was propped against the wall. Parva listened for the sounds of her mother upstairs, busying around with the clothes as she hung them on the roof to dry. Parva was forbidden from the roof, but she imagined that the view must be the most beautiful in all Benanz. Her mind was wild with imagination, the things that must be on the roof offered unlimited potential. She liked that. She enjoyed not knowing, the thrill of being able to find something and look upon it for the first time. Even at her age, and barely able to see above the window ledge when stood on her toes, the girl was remarkably active. Her dreams were vivid enough to touch, taste and smell. But they were just that, dreams. The sound of heavy footsteps from above awoke Parva from her momentary paralysis and as she lifted her head

up to the stairway in front of her she saw the crawling shadow of her mother descend from the darkness.

'Ah there you are Parva,' her mother said with a wide smile, she looked calmer than before. 'You look warm my love, drink and cool down.'

'OK mama.' Parva replied but remaining unmoved. The pull her mother's strong arms lifted her into the air, and her legs wrapped around the woman's waist like a boa. Her mother lifted a small cup to her daughter's mouth and Parva drank from it. The bitter taste of Benanzi water trickled down her throat.

'Where is Ravi mama?' Parva said suddenly in between rhythmic gulps. Her mother scowled and sat her daughter atop the small table.

'He is training my love, at the academy.'

Now Parva scowled.

'But he's too skinny to be a soldier mama, and he's useless with a sword.'

Her mother held in a laugh.

'He is eating more and more my love building his strength every day. And how would you know about his swordsmanship?'

Parva shrugged.

'I've seen him at the riverbank with the other boys, they practise with big wooden ones. Ravi always gets knocked down though.' She said sadly.

'Ah so you think you could do better?' Her mother replied with a knowing smile.

'Maybe, I don't know really. But I do worry about him mama, he could get hurt.'

'These boys know what they are doing my love, no matter how many times a mother nags at them or a

sister scowls. These boys are stubborn, and they all want them same thing.'

Parva titled her head slightly in confusion.

'They all want to be heroes my love. They want to be legends in some great battle or war.' Her mother said finally. Parva's brow furrowed.

'Like Rha Thu'Ma mama?' She asked curiously.

Her mother smiled at her. 'Yes, very much so my little one. Or Kwendi the Great or Poto the War Demon!'

Parva's mind spun now, her imagination wild with thoughts and wonders of what these legends, these heroes, had truly been. What did they look like? What did they wear? Were they nice people or were they scoundrels? She didn't know, and perhaps she'd never know.

'Your eyes are growing too big for your face little one. Calm down and remember what Nana used to say. Can you remember what she used to say?'

Parva thought for a moment, theatrically tapping her chin and sighing heavily for added effect. In truth, her Nana was a vague memory now, and to Parva even the colour of her hair and the tone of her skin seemed to alter ever so slightly whenever the young girl thought of her. She remembered her voice clearly, like the sound of rocks been dragged across iron with a thick Theroki accent. Those accentuated vowels rolling over that dry purple tongue, which was held back by two thin grey lips, Parva shivered slightly at that recollection.

'No mama, I cannot remember.' The girl said finally, her mind had been drawn to other things.

'Then perhaps you should clear your mind of some of those silly thoughts? Then you might be able to find what you are looking for. A mind is like a home, and no one likes a messy home filled with things we do not need. Is that right little one?' Her mother returned with a foul expression.

'But mama-' began the girl, but a quick finger to her lips stopped her.

'No Parva, no ifs or buts now. Silly girl, you need to realise what we are here for and why we do what we do. No daughter of mine is going to be running down the streets pretending to be in some academy somewhere. No! It won't do at all!'

Parva stared into her mother's eyes, and for a moment she wondered if she could see the past that had brought her mother to be the woman she had become. It was a flashing moment, a brief glimpse, and one Parva could

not tell if she had thought of or had genuinely witnessed. And her mother stared back at her, with a worried expression and a weary face that had aged beyond the woman's actual years. Troubles, hardships and heartache had brought this woman to that moment, and it was far from over.

Chapter Two

The sky was darkening now, the final rays of the sun were bloated against the mountains and distant sand dunes. Overhead, a sea of stars began to twinkle brightly, and birds of prey stalked the night sky. Slowly opening his eyes, Ravi Banshir was awoken from a peaceful sleep by the low rhythmical beat of a drum. Turning his head, still cocooned in his thin blankets, he

fixed his gaze onto the whitewash ceiling of his barrack and yawned. A fly danced around the ceiling, cleaning its legs at every landing, and Ravi Banshir imagined all the great secrets, whispers and conversations that fly might have been privy to. Struggling to keep his eyes open, the young man fumbled to grasp the wooden cup that lay beside his bed. He drank from it, and the rush of cold water rushed through his body like a bolt of lightning. His mouth was dry, even the water seemed to slide off the walls of his mouth and his lips. It was the air more than likely, squalid and flat and unmoving through the night when the winds were kept at bay by the walls of the barracks. Another sip of water and the man was awake. He pulled himself up, resting his back against the cold stone wall and turned his heavy head to face the other beds, he was alone. The other beds had been neatly made, sheets tightly pulled and gently

folded as per the instructions of the masters. The sound of drums maintained, and as Ravi became more and more aware of his surroundings, he realised that the beat soundly oddly familiar to him, though not through his association to the Temple Guards Academy.

A few moments later and the boy, for that was a truer analysis of him, bundled his way down the cold stone steps that led out into the main courtyard of the academy. Before him stood a large white gravelled plain, with high walls of thick sandstone topped at each corner with wooden watch towers. Beyond them lay the city of Benanz and further still the desert plains and dunes of Ravi's childhood. A sea of men stood against the wall nearest to the doorway where Ravi now stood, his crisp white robes shining brightly against the morning sun. He followed his companions by shielding

his face, and through narrowed eyes saw the sight of a hundred men dressed in dark green cloaks, with emerald-coloured turbans and glistening shamshir blades at their hips. A line of men played the drums, hung against one hip, and several men held flutes and other percussion instruments. The faces of the men were covered, with eyes between two walls of fabric that fit tightly against both brow and nose.

'Ravi, come here my brother!' Said a whispered voice from along the wall. Ravi turned and searched along the line of men until at last he found the familiar face of Sheran Da'Maal.

'Sheran my brother, what in the name of Najim Al Janut is this?' Ravi returned, squeezing between his friend another, taller soldier.

'A travelling party from Kerrin.' Replied Sheran, his eyes flitting between his friend and the performance of the men in the courtyard.

'A travelling party? You mean like a band or something?' Ravi replied.

'No, my friend, I mean like a convoy. A military convoy, probably here for diplomatic talks with Najim Al Janut.'

Ravi frowned and turned his attention back to the men.

'But why are they here? Surely they should be at the Palace?'

'Najim is not at the Palace, he is with his men at Arac. These lot will be camping here I should imagine.' Sheran returned with a shrug of his shoulders.

Sheran was a tall man, his beard though blotchy was thick where it grew and his deep-set eyes were a

marvellous golden colour. His voice was soft, often hushed and his words fluttered like worried birds across the wind. As the wall of men watched with complete fascination, the drumming slowed and the men in the courtyard began to hum in low sombre unison. A man on horseback, who had evaded the gaze of all the Temple Guards, suddenly came into view. His armour was bronze, with leather tightly bound and stitched at the shoulder and chest plates. His face was shrouded like his men, but his eyes showed a fierceness that none of these young warriors had ever seen. The mare trotted along the line of men and as it turned Sheran became aware of the glorious weapon that was strapped to the man's back. The kopis, with its heavy curving blade glistening bright against the sunlight. There was only one warrior that carried that blade, Galak the Blood-thirsty. Galak was a man revered throughout the

Eastern Empires. Originally from Morok Nu Maas, he had been a sellsword in his early years and has later joined the Bronze Company in Zain. There, he became embroiled with the assassination plot against Tete II, Lord Emperor. The attempt, though leaving the Lord Emperor blinded, ultimately failed. Soon after and with almost the entire armies at Tete's command at his tail, he escaped and fled to Kerrin, the capital of Milossori and the neighbouring Empire to Mair, home to Arac and Benanz. Only now did Ravi truly understand what it meant to carry such a legend on your shoulders, and as Garak glared across the courtyard towards the lowly recruits, he seemed to wrinkle his thick brows and sneer. Some of the recruits dared to return the man's impressions, something which the warriors of Garak grumbled at.

'Ah, so it is true.' Said a clear, low voice from above the recruits. Ravi looked up, shielding his eyes from the sun and seeing the silhouetted figure of Den Li, Master of the Temple Guards.

Garak slowed his horse, standing in front of his men as he eyed up the Master.

'My men grow weary; they require food and drink.'

Garak's voice seemed cold, harsh as rock and without a trace of fear or worry.

'Of course, any friend of Najim Al Janut is a friend of mine. Please, dismount and my recruits will see to your men.' Den's smile was forced, that much Ravi could tell. But as the Master clapped his hands, the recruits moved from the wall and out into the courtyard to greet the men of Milossori. Ravi wandered close behind, he felt uneasy. Behind him, Den Li watched his men closely, sighing heavily as he wondered what this might

bring to his sacred temple. The thought only grew as once again he met the eyes of Garak, who stayed unmoved atop his beast, as the Temple Guards swarmed around him.

Garak watched the recruits closely, keeping his horse still as men brushed against it. His own men began to remove the drums, unstrapping them and handing them to the Temple Guards, before also passing over some large sacks that carried everything from clothing to small ration packs. The weapons remained with the men though, and there was a clear distrust between both sets of men. Suddenly a tug to his right gave Garak cause to swing his head around, where he laid cruel eyes upon two young boys with bed-fresh hair, one with a blotchy beard and the other as clean shaven as the day he were born. The two stopped, and the clean shaven

one took a step back as he locked eyes on the fierce warrior.

'Have you no manners?' The man spat down to the boys.

'My apologies Commander we were -'

'I know precisely what you were doing boy, do not think me a fool. But do you not know how to address yourselves?' Garak returned quickly. His words cut through the men like spears. A moment of silence followed before Ravi spoke.

'My name is Ravi, and this is Sheran. We are Temple Guards of Benanz under the command of Master Den Li.'

Garak nodded slowly, and his gaze flicked between the two before he motioned them to take the bags from his side. Sheran took it and handed it to Ravi. The bag was heavy, under the lip of the fabric the young man found

the shining edge of a golden wine goblet. A steady breath on his neck told Ravi to turn his head and bring his eyes upwards, Garak stood beside him. He held Ravi's arm tightly, and his other hand a small dagger pushed against the boy's side.

'Gold is precious my boy, especially in a place such as this. If I so much as smell you near my things again, I will cut you down and slice every piece of meat from your bones and feed you to the scrounging muts that hang on every street corner of this place. Do I make myself clear?'

Ravi nodded efore handing the bag over to Garak who made his way across the courtyard and onto the stone steps that led towards Den Li.

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An Eagle flew across the cyan skies and rested atop the peak of the furthest dome; its clawed feet wrapped tightly against terracotta tiles. Tilting its head slightly it focused on the furthest hillock that sat lazily against the riverbanks of the Anu, beyond the rough patch of Joshua trees and ocotillo, its eyes found a small oddly shaped rock white rock that appeared to squirm along the ground. Against the sunlight, the rock seemed to sweat and white clouded droplets danced along its top. Further along, another two rocks squirmed at the twisted roots of a creosote Bush. The Eagle hissed and against the desert sands the three rocks slid away, it seemed that this bird was not the only predator lurking in the distance.

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Den Li watched the bird curiously but drew his gaze away when the heavy footsteps of Garak the Blood-thirsty approached him.

'I welcome you to my Temple, Garak of Milossori.'

The Master said with a warm, fake smile.

'That is not my name, and neither am I of Milossori descent.' The Commander returned, eyeing Den Li up and down as if were meat on a market stall. Li was a short man, with a small black moustache and pale skin that gave away to a crown of short black hair that danced along his neck and down his back in one long ponytail. Dark blue robes, and black strapped slippers were his choice of attire.

'Nevertheless, I welcome you. Now, perhaps we can walk and discuss your visit.' Garak sensed it was not a question and bid the small man to lead on. The temple doors stood ajar, guarded by four men in pristine silver

armour with white satin sashes running from one shoulder until it tied with a wide red sash which ran around their stomach's. But the two men did not enter the Temple, instead they broke away onto a small gravel path that led along the side of the grand building. From here, the walls that surrounded them appeared to still be two or three men high. Garak looked along the wall, there were no men walking along it.

'These walls have stood for over three hundred years my friend. The stone was brought from the El Kharthor Mountains. They have never been breached.' Den said without so much as a glance to his companion.

'And the walls of the city?' Garak replied knowingly.

'Alas it is true, the city was breached once. But we are not here to discuss the stories of pretender kings and the legend of Saar Bur now, are we?'

The two men stopped, and Garak saw before him the glorious garden of Den Li, something even he had heard whispers of. The sound of parrots, monkeys and insects filled the Commander's senses. And turning to Li he saw the man edging towards a small wicker chair and table that sat in the shade. Garak followed and sat beside the man. From behind them a young boy, perhaps only twelve years of age, came with a tray of lemon tea in two small ceramic cups. Li took a sip and sighed heavily before encouraging the Commander to try the beverage.

'These are dangerous times my friend. Our King is in a precarious position.' Li said as he watched the man drink. Garak was surprised at the drink, he enjoyed it.

'Indeed, they are, that is why we have come here.'

Garak replied.

'Who exactly is "we", my friend.'

Garak grimaced and turned to see if they were alone. To his eyes they were. He leaned forward and whispered.

'Our Prince. He wishes to offer a deal to your King. If he accepts then perhaps the games may cease a while longer.'

Li's brow furrowed in confusion.

'Surely you do not imagine your King to be truly free from the malice and hatred that is felt for him? He will be removed, by force if necessary.'

'The Royal Court?' Li answered. Garak replied with a slow nod.

Li closed his eyes for a moment and took a long intake of clear air.

'They seek to remove him.' Garak said.

'But why?' Asked Li.

Garak could not contain his laugh, and it was loud and rang about the peaceful garden like the drums of war.

‘Why? Because once this city was a jewel in crown my friend, and now it sits at the banks of a river with no status at all. The Empress of Cyronos herself calls this place a disgrace. Surely you have seen it? The trading docks are getting more and more deserted. The High Families have moved on, many across to Milossori or beyond, and with them they have taken hundreds of jobs and skilled servants. Not even the mineral mines are worth the danger anymore.’

‘This cannot be allowed to happen.’ Li said, his voice trembling for a moment before he found his composure. ‘Precisely why our Prince requires an audience with your King. Perhaps this will be Teek Najim Al Janut's final chance.’

‘For what exactly?’

‘Peace my friend, peace.’

Chapter Three

Maar returned to the parapets in a far more unsure and worrisome mood. The drums of war were now beginning to be heard, the whispering rhythms of that terrible song, sweeping in across the desert winds. The

Commander shivered slightly and looking across that arid land he wondered for a brief moment what Najim was hoping for exactly. Victory of course, was not guaranteed against the guerrilla warfare of the desert clans, but in the mind of Najim it seemed almost inconceivable that the conflicts should end in any other fashion. From below, the heavy doors of the barracks opened and a single rider entered into the courtyards below. Maar enquired to one of the guards and it appeared a city messenger had been sent from the Academy.

The boy was young, a scrawny figure dressed in tattered robes and wearing a straw hat that shattered the sunlight into a thousand small bolts of light whenever he turned his head. As he took to the parapet the boy

bowed low before Maar, handing him the parchment.

Maar broke the seal easily and read.

'Li?' A Captain enquired as he took to Maar's side.

Maar read on before answering. 'Garak and his men have arrived. They've brought the Prince with them.

Apparently, they want to negotiate with Najim.'

The Captain gave a snorting laugh. 'Ha! Doesn't surprise me, too bloody late though.'

Maar mumbled something to himself, his eyes still on the parchment. 'Prince Tyrec, it makes no sense.' He muttered again.

'Surely Tyrec knows the dangers of being here.' The Captain returned, meeting Maar's worried gaze.

'Indeed, even with Garak and his men here he is outnumbered. Najim could kill him any day if he wanted.'

'Why does he want a treaty?'

‘Fear would be my guess, fear of something bigger.’

‘Cyronos?’ The Captain replied, his brow arched.

‘No, not Cyronos. But Najim cannot be deaf to what is happening in the streets and taverns. Only a fool would lock himself away with no connection to his people.’

‘You think he has spies?’

‘You *know* he has spies.’ Maar answered with a smile, the two men laughed, and Maar returned his gaze outward to the dusty plains beyond. He tapped his fingers on the edge of the parapet for a moment as he thought, his thin gaze watching the horizon closely.

Tilting his head slightly he narrowed his gaze further to the distant shimmering of an approaching rider, the sunlight bouncing from his helmet. The Captain focused his gaze on the approaching rider now, craning his neck to try and get as good a look as he could. The

messenger stood quietly for a moment, before tapping on Maar's shoulder.

‘What?’ Said Maar impatiently.

‘The parchment sir, what shall I tell Master Li?’ The scrawny boy returned, his voice quivering and cracking.

‘Tell him that Najim will return to his palace this evening. We will meet with Prince Tyrec there!’ Maar grumbled, shoving the boy away as he gestured for the gates below to be opened to the rider.

The rider came through a few moments later, his body limp and his skin pale under armour that had been battered and scorched with iron tongs. A standard symbol of the tribesmen of the Benanzi borderlands.

Maar descended the stairs and came through the gathering crowd that had encircled the poor boy rider.

The warhorse had been unharmed, and not a piece of

uniform, armour or weapon had been taken. Maar pulled the boy's head up, the dark voids of his eye sockets revealing to Maar that this was the work of one tribe alone.

'Teraki.' Maar grumbled, his teeth grating as he slung the boy over, leaving others to quickly catch him as he fell from his saddle.

'That's the fifth one in fourteen days.' Taro said as he swished his drink around the cup and sighed.

'They're trying to bait us. Trying to make us do something rash.' Returned another quickly.

'We cannot ignore this much longer.' Maar said, looking across to Taro. Taro met his gaze and nodded solemnly.

'Of course not, but *we* aren't the ones in charge.' Maar returned, flicking his eyes towards the guarded door

where Najim hid. Najim had never once proved himself a capable leader. He was a child of aristocracy, high walls and heavily armoured doors. His place in the world was unquestionable to himself, and so his mind had never once wondered to the possibilities that those below him were worth so much as thought. He laughed at the folk who bowed to him, who were bound to his cause by the blood of those who had founded Benanz all those centuries ago. Indeed, Prince Teek Najim Al Janut was, to nearly all who served him, a child in the body of a man. He professed himself a swordsman, a man of war and battle, who bathed in the blood of his downed enemies and who gnarled at the bones of those who sought to remove him. Alas, all were as truthful as the dreams of a whore.

‘...I hear he talks of Kalak Dum.’ These words brought Maar back to his surroundings. Taroc eyed him curiously, searching for a sign of truth to the rumours.

‘Aye, that is true. He hopes that we fight them head on, in a blaze of glory.’ Maar returned.

Taroc inhaled a deep, thoughtful breath. The exhale was undeniably one of sadness.

‘The pass then, we’ll be cut down like fish in a barrel.’ Maar sighed and nodded in agreement.