

CHAPTER 2 – CAMP DIRDAHN

The Companions' journey through the forest of Southern Leudra proved uneventful. Though this region was part of the ancient Gisterwoud, the Leudran princes had domesticated their woods ages ago. A network of paths connected hunting cabins with wood plantations - and, after three days, with Davall's army camp. Even so, Ghyll didn't feel easy. The memory of the Dar'khamorth sorceress and her helper, the boar man who had nearly beaten him to death in the Gisterwoud, were still too fresh in his mind.

'We're almost there.' Knight Druyel, the escort commander, pointed to the treeless hill rising up from the forest. 'On the other side lies the camp.'

As they neared the top, they heard the blaring sound of a horn. At the first notes of the signal, Ghyll had already drawn his sword.

'It's noon,' said Druyel apologetically. 'The changing of the Guard.'

Ghyll grimaced. 'This forest carries bad memories,' he said sheepishly. With a clack of his tongue, he urged his horse and galloped to the top. Once there, he stopped and stared at the camp at his feet.

'That's the standard of the 6th Corps,' said Damion, and the lieutenant nodded.

'The first two kolonnes. The third guards Leudra City.'

Camp Dirdahn was a complete village of tents, kitchens and latrines, surrounded by a tall palisade. Two heavily armed soldiers in the shining armor of the Guard in Leudra were posted at the main gate. When Ghyll and his Companions approached with their escort, the soldiers came clattering to attention. Knight Druyel asked a few short questions and then turned to Ghyll.

'Lady Tilia is with us, Baron; the general is here. I will bring you to his headquarters.'

This was the first time that Ghyll had visited a military encampment and he looked with approval at the orderly activity. The square tents for the troops formed straight lanes. At the end of every lane stood a smaller tent, for the officers, he supposed. After every two tents, there was a separate place for cooking. Everything was well organized and disciplined.

'My father's wet dream,' muttered Damion, staring around him.

'Hah!' said Uwella.

The boy colored. 'Excuse me, it slipped out,' he said, grinning broadly.

Ghyll smiled at Damion's unmeant apology.

When they reached the command tent in the exact center of the camp, the escort halted. At the entrance stood a Guard, motionless at attention.

‘Is the general in?’ asked Druyel.

The Guard moved her eyes to the speaker. ‘Yes, Lieutenant,’ she said. ‘But the general can’t be disturbed. He is in discussion with the staff.’

Knight Druyel glanced at Ghyll, but he received no response. ‘Tell the general that Baron Halwyrd, the King’s Lieutenant, has arrived and requests a moment of his time.’

The Guard hesitated.

‘The King’s Lieutenant is the representative of His Grace the Regent. He is not accustomed to waiting,’ growled Druyel.

The woman’s eyes glazed over, and with military stiffness, she disappeared into the tent.

Olle pushed the standard into Torril’s hands. ‘Here, keep it upright if you love your hide.’

The boy paled and unconsciously imitated the stance of the Guard, with the banner lance planted firmly between his feet.

A few moments later, the Guard returned, held the tent flap open for Ghyll, and shouted, ‘Baron Halwyrd, King’s Lieutenant.’

‘Wait here,’ said Ghyll to the rest, as he stepped inside with Olle and Zino on his heels.

The surprised buzz in the tent died down, and everyone stood up. A tall, elderly man with a general’s badge on his armor came forward. That was Davall. Ghyll recognized him immediately by the resemblance to his son.

‘You are the King’s Lieutenant?’ asked the general. ‘You seem a little young for that position.’

Ghyll silently handed him his credentials and Davall gave them a fleeting look. Then he solemnly saluted.

‘Welcome, Baron Halwyrd. Excuse me that I hesitated, but I had not yet heard of your appointment. You surprise me with this visit. Are you here to inspect the maneuvers?’

‘Your hesitation is perfectly understandable, General. My appointment is recent and my arrival here is strictly confidential. I have come for something very different from the exercises, I fear. I would speak with you alone, because it is a delicate matter.’

Davall frowned. ‘There is nothing wrong with my...’

‘Oh no,’ said Ghyll quickly. ‘It’s purely business. I’ve met your son Jerann. He is an excellent officer. It was a pleasure to work with him.’

The general grinned and bowed. 'Thank you. It does my heart good to hear that, Excellency.' He gave brief orders to the officer nearest to him. The man saluted and led the others outside.

Davall pointed to a folding chair. 'That's the most comfort I can offer,' he said with a smile. 'How may I help you?'

Ghyll's face was tight. 'I can count on your discretion, General Davall?'

The general nodded. 'Of course, Excellency.'

'Then let me first introduce my companions, this is my foster brother and aide, Olle thu Maubyn, and this is His Highness Prince Zinobad of Opit-Mandaba.'

Davall jumped up. 'But...'

Ghyll made an impatient gesture. 'I already said that our presence has nothing to do with your maneuvers, General.'

Davall smiled. 'Excuse me, I was only surprised. His Highness is always welcome, at our maneuvers or otherwise.'

Zino put his hand on his stomach and bowed slightly.

'The prince is in Rhidauna in connection with the case I'm working on,' said Ghyll. 'At the request of the regent, I reopened the investigations into the death of King Halfraud, the Queen, and the two princes, linked to the murder of King Idrami and Prince Meridan of Opit, nine years ago. We have strong indications that all these crimes were committed by or on behalf of the same organization. There are also indications that members of this organization have recently been active against the Nhael Islands, but we lack details.'

'That's quite something you're telling me,' said Davall slowly. 'I had heard of the regicide in Opit, but a connection with our deaths is new to me. And then the Nhael... does that information come from the Heralds?'

Ghyll shook his head. 'An eyewitness told us.'

'Reliable?'

'Absolutely.'

'Then I must accept it.' Davall stood up as if he wanted to pace, but apparently he remembered with whom he spoke, for he sat down again with a grunt. 'I have long been convinced that the deaths in the royal family were no accidents. After my investigations, I had clues pointing in a particular direction, but with insufficient evidence to make a case out of it. It was someone at the royal court, a...'

The agitated sound of trumpets drowned his words. Davall jumped up and grabbed his helmet. At the same time, the tent flap opened and an officer rushed inside.

‘General!’ There was panic in his voice. ‘We are under attack from the air by whole swarms of burning birds.’

‘Dar’khamorth phoenixes.’ Ghyll did his best to suppress the fear that exploded in his breast. ‘General, I suggest use your archers and artillery. Keep those birds at a distance, or they’ll burn everything.’

Outside, the confusion was absolute. Tents caught flame and turned into burning traps. Half-dressed soldiers ran around, some in blind panic, while in the air hundreds of firebirds dove and danced, sowing fire all over the camp. Here and there, a sergeant knew what he had to do, but to Ghyll’s surprise most of the officers stood helplessly looking around.

Ghyll felt Childegard, his animated sword, vibrate, and instinctively, he ducked. Over his head came one of the phoenixes right at the command tent, and in seconds, Davall’s headquarters was ablaze. Ghyll couldn’t see the general anywhere and he wondered for a moment if Davall had come out with them.

Beside Ghyll, Olle shouted to a group of archers. ‘Don’t bunch up. Spread out! Cover each other.’

Ghyll twisted round to his Companions.

‘See what you can do in this mess,’ he said tersely. ‘Torril, stay with me and hold that standard high.’ He drew his sword. ‘Childegard, thanks for the warning. That damned bird would’ve shaved me.’

You don’t need a shave yet, Sire, thought Childegard with a faint chuckle. *Well, we’ve gone to war then.* His soft singing filled the air.

We’ve gone to war... Ghyll looked around and tried to discover how the battle was going, but the smoke from the burning tents masked a lot of the action.

Two figures appeared. ‘Where is the general?’ asked the first one, in agitation. Ghyll recognized him as the officer who in the command tent had stood closest to Davall.

‘I’m afraid he’s still in his tent,’ he said. ‘I didn’t see him come out. Who are you?’

‘Colonel Tovias, the adjutant. Oh Gods, the general.’ The man seemed on the verge of panic.

‘Colonel,’ said Ghyll as steadily as he could. ‘You should collect as many of the soldiers as you can. Rearrange them in groups to fight the fires. We must leave the defense to the archers and the artillery today.’

The second figure stepped forward. ‘I’m Marris, of the Stormriders. I came to report to the general that my riders were awaiting his orders.’ She glanced at the distraught Adjutant. ‘As he isn’t available, I will mount an aerial attack.’

Ghyll saw a slightly built woman of middle age, in the blue uniform of the martial arm of the Skysailors. ‘Stormriders! I had no idea you were here, commander. You are very welcome. Please, do whatever you can.’ Marris bowed and the two officers disappeared back into the smoke.

From the other end of the camp came the sound of heavy mangonels throwing their loads at the firebirds. Ghyll heard cheers and Torril tugged at his sleeve. ‘We have one!’

Suddenly, a firebird came straight at them. *Curse it, no cover anywhere!* Ghyll lifted his sword and with his other arm, he pushed Torril behind his back. *Childegard, help!*

The sword laughed. *Ice and snow, cold fun.* It had turned white as a deadly icicle and when it attacked, small snowflakes swirled around its blade. The attacking bird was as big as a raven, and covered in flames. The firebird opened its hooked beak and squawked as it pushed the fiery tongues in their direction with his wings. Ghyll took a swipe at the monster’s head, while Torril screamed. Again, the bird sent a wave of fire, but the cold of the magic sword absorbed the heat and they felt nothing. When Torril understood they were in no danger, he gave vent to a stream of Nhaelish profanity. Ghyll slashed again at the phoenix, and this time his blade connected. The bird somersaulted and crashed to the ground, convulsing as the flames slowly died around it. Torril jumped forward and hacked wildly at the feathered body. ‘There!’ he said between gritted teeth, while tears streamed down his cheeks. ‘There, and there and there!’ Ghyll grabbed him by the shoulder.

‘You can stop now; it is dead.’

Torril’s face was contorted. ‘Dammit,’ he said. ‘I’ve never been so scared.’ He took a deep breath. ‘It was Vandhaer all over, where they killed my men and took me prisoner.’

Ghyll stared at Torril. ‘Your face is full of red spots.’

‘Yours too,’ said the boy, ‘as if you’ve been in the sun too long.’ Suddenly he let out a cry. ‘Look!’

Ghyll turned and gaped at the sight of nebulous shapes floating upwards against the backdrop of the blue sky. On their backs, they bore warriors with long lances, who spitted the firebirds like spear fishers.

‘They’re the Stormriders!’ shouted Torril, while he raised Ghyll’s banner high. ‘Now we stand a chance!’

CHAPTER 3 - BO BRINGS AID

Bo looked around the battlefield and wondered what he had best do. All around him, the flames roared, and for the first time he cursed his habit of wearing flowing, and highly inflammable, robes. He passed three soldiers bringing a wounded comrade to safety. The men were in a bad way, he saw. Bleeding, sooty and with staring eyes, they carried their terribly burned mate.

‘Don’t go to your tent,’ said Bo urgently. ‘That’s too dangerous. Take him to the forest’s edge.’ His words did not reach the men and they disappeared inside.

The mage shook his head and hurried on. Behind him came a bang and the crackling of fire. Screams rent the air, but he didn’t pause to look back. From the corner of his eye, he had seen the flutter of wings. He drew his long robe up to his knees and started to run. For a second he glanced over his right shoulder - and promptly stumbled over a dead soldier. Down he went, headlong into the charred grass. He heard the triumphant screech of a bird overhead. This was it, he realized, no escape possible. Already he thought to feel the heat of the fire, the terrible sensation of being burned alive... *Temple portals*. His mind built the image of a mana tap. It was such a simple thing. You flipped it open; the mana flowed into it and... *Open, cursed thing, open up!* A searing pain tore through his body and everything went black.

When he came to, he was lying face down on a smooth floor. There was no pain, no heat. He groaned. A fiery blur leaned over him and a familiar voice said something that didn’t penetrate his mind. Bo tried to speak, but his mouth wouldn’t form the words. Helpful hands dragged him into a sitting position. Someone poured liquid down his throat. Automatically he swallowed and his eyesight returned. ‘Help!’ The shout wasn’t louder than a whisper.

‘All is well, you are safe.’ The voice came from far away, but now he could understand what it said.

‘Help!’ said Bo again. ‘Phoenixes!’ Slowly his brain and his muscles started to function again. He blinked a few times and ran his fingers through his long hair. *I’ll never get rid of the stink*, he thought stupidly. Then his awareness returned in full and he looked about wildly. This was not the camp. ‘Where am I? How did I get here?’

‘We were wondering the same thing, my boy,’ said Father Traun. ‘Your arrival sounded very different from a normal transport.’

‘I... I ported myself.’ *Fantus’s temple in Leudra-City*. The thought stunned him. He pushed himself up with his staff and stood swaying on his feet. ‘Father Traun, the Guard needs help.’ Quickly he told of the attack on the army camp, and all the dead and wounded.

The senior priest of Fantus thought for a moment. ‘Can you walk?’ Bo nodded and staggered forward. The old man looked at him and said, ‘I don’t think so.’ He motioned to one of his acolytes. ‘Have the litter brought, will you?’ The lad ran away and soon a large wooden sedan chair with red curtains appeared at the portal’s entrance, accompanied by an escort of priests on horseback. Father Traun helped Bo get in and sat down beside him. Then the eight bearers lifted their burden effortlessly from the ground and pushed their way through the crowds on the street.

‘Where are we going?’ said Bo.

‘To the palace. The prince is the only one who can act fast enough.’

Castle Leudra lay on a hill in the eastern part of the city. In its original form it dated from the first century after the Fall of Abarran, when the principality of Leudra was still an independent state. Later generations extended the square keep to a large pentagonal building with massive walls and heavy towers, and added elegant pedestal galleries with a hedge of by now ancient beech trees.

At the gate, Guards passed them through and the bearers carried the chair rapidly uphill to the main entrance. Here two priests of the escort helped Bo down. The young mage straightened his back, and immediately the pain shot through his body. The priests saw his face and without a word, they went to either side of him. With their help, and leaning on his staff, Bo stumbled behind Father Traun into the palace. Here a court official met them and led them down a long corridor to a marble room with statues along the walls. High windows on both sides let in a sea of sunlight and offered a view of beautiful gardens.

The prince rose from his seat. Bo stopped abruptly when he saw him. His supporters assumed it was the pain and waited patiently. Actually, he was amazed at the similarity between Leudra’s ruler and Ghyll. *No wonder everyone immediately knew who our friend was*, thought Bo. *They could have been brothers, instead of cousins.*

Wyllander Leudra-Lidraud was tall and elegant. He gave the impression of being more at home at Court than on the battlefield. Yet the sword at his side rested in a businesslike sheath that clearly had known better days. His robe was sober and the only adornment he wore was the Order of the Clover on his shoulder. Unlike Ghyll, he had hair the color of tarnished bronze and wore a short beard.

He greeted the priest politely, but with a slight undertone of surprise in his voice. ‘Father Traun, we see you too little. Who is your companion?’

‘This is the fire adept Bernabo Lusindral, Highness. His message is urgent, so I took the liberty to come to you without appointment.’

The prince gestured to a servant. 'Chairs for the Father Superior and the Mage Adept.' He himself returned to the high seat. 'Tell me, Adept. What news do you bring?'

'Highness, I come straight from General Davall. Camp Dirdahn suffered an attack by firebirds. It is in immediate need of assistance.'

'What do you say? Impossible!' The prince shot up and his face was red with anger. 'Davall has more than two thousand men under his command. Nobody attacks so large an army and certainly not on Leudra's own territory. Are you trying to make a fool of me, Adept?'

Bo clenched his jaw and his eyes blazed. To be called a liar! He took a deep breath. 'Highness, I speak the solemn truth. These are the same uncreatures that destroyed Castle Tinnurad two months ago.' He glanced around and bent over. 'They're Dar'khamorth uncreatures! The regent appointed Baron Halwyrd as King's Lieutenant, to find out about these attacks, Highness, and I belong to his retinue.'

'Halwyrd?' said the prince slowly, while the red in his face subsided. 'Ghyll Halwyrd?' A sudden, small smile played around his mouth, but then his face tensed. 'And how did you get here, Adept? As far as I know there is no portal connection between Camp Dirdahn and Leudra City.'

'I wish I knew, Highness. One minute I was in the camp, in the firm belief I was about to be killed. The next moment I lay on the floor in Fantus's portal.'

'That's not unheard of, Highness,' said Father Traun. 'In situations of great need, a mage can pass impossible boundaries.'

'Is the battle still going?'

'It was half an hour ago, Highness. Every moment we delay may be fatal,' said Bo sharply.

'The Adept may be good at his profession, but his tact is lacking,' said the prince grimly.

'Please remember he knows the urgency of the situation, Highness,' said Father Traun.

The prince sat silent. 'That's true.' He clapped his hands and a servant came. 'Call my secretary. Five minutes.' The servant didn't even flinch at this command and hurried away.

Bo leaned back in his chair and tried to relax his protesting muscles while he waited. He realized Leudra's military options were limited. All the regular troops the prince possessed were part of Davall's 6th Corps. Still, in case of emergency, the local temples could muster enough temple soldiers amongst them for a small army. Bo desperately hoped they would be in time. In his mind, he saw Ghyll, Olle and the others as charred bodies in a burnt out camp and... Roughly, he pushed the images away and tried to concentrate on the prince and his commands. While Leudra dictated his orders, a squire brought the princely armor.

'You are coming with us?' asked Bo with surprise.

The prince looked at him. 'Of course. Leudra will not fail his troops. Besides, I am thinking Baron Halwyrd expects it of me.'

Bo swallowed. *He knows who Ghyll is!* With difficulty, he kept his face neutral. 'Your troops will appreciate it greatly, Highness,' he said.

The prince laughed. 'You have a rudiment of tact after all, mage?'