



A WARRIOR'S Journey

The
Ergoth Trilogy
volume one

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P r o l o g u e :

The Prince's Charge



Tarsis, Year of the City 224

From Valgold, Prince of Vergerone, to Hanira of the Golden House, chosen voice of the guild of jewelsmiths.

Secret! This document is not to be shared outside the Golden House!

Greetings, Lady Hanira. Let me be the first to congratulate you on your accession to the ambassadorship to Ergoth. As a former emissary to the imperial court myself, I feel obligated to give you a foretaste of what awaits you in Daltigoth.

Since the founding of the Ergoth Empire by the savage warlord Ackal Ergot just two years after the founding of our own sovereign city, there has been continual conflict and competition between us. The Bay War, the Mountain War, the War of the Silver Skulls checked the southward expansion of Ergoth's mounted hordes, but each time at enormous cost to the city's treasury. The great drain on our coffers continues so long as we are forced to maintain a mercenary army in the field to deter Ergothian aggression.

Lately the crisis has been focused on Hylo. Large numbers of itinerant Ergothian merchants have infiltrated the kender kingdom, infringing on the natural monopoly of trade Tarsis enjoys there. The kender, lacking patriotic feeling, have done little to resist this peddler invasion. Ergothian traders supply considerable quantities of food, cattle, leather, textiles, and wine from the large farming estates of their western provinces.

Our merchants provide similar commodities. But as these must come by sea and from further away, our prices tend to be higher than the Ergothians'. Witless kender, not realizing they are selling their independence for the sake of cheaper cloth, increasingly choose Ergothian goods over ours. There is evidence the emperor's agents have bribed Kharolian pirates to harass our ships as they round the continent on their way to Hylo. It is for this reason that every convoy from Tarsis must be escorted by armed galleys of the City Navy, an expense that only serves to increase further the cost of our trade goods.

Trading rights in Hylo will therefore be one of the foremost topics of your discussions in Daltigoth. As chosen chief of the guild of gold, silver, and jewel makers of Tarsis, you are accustomed to dealing with wealthy and powerful clients. This will serve you in good stead in dealing with the proud but violent Ergothian nobility.

Shortly after I returned from Daltigoth, it was announced that the king of Hylo, Lucklyn I, had openly declared his vassalage to the emperor. If true, this is a setback for us, but not a fatal one. Money and trade are more important than feudal loyalties, so if you can wrest concessions in Hylo from Ergoth, then the kender king can bend his knee to the emperor as deeply as he likes.

Great things are astir, Lady Hanira. The dormant war between the Ackal and Pakin dynasts has flared anew since the assassination of Emperor Pakin II, an Ackal in spite of his name. The Pakin Pretender has raised an army of unknown size in the north and threatens several minor provincial strongholds. Forces loyal to the Ackal heir are moving to destroy him. Do not become entangled in this brutal, confusing struggle! The intricacies of the Ackal-Pakin feud would confound the wisest sages in Tarsis.

For example, the murdered emperor, Pakin II, chose his regnal name in an attempt to reconcile both sides to his rule. Far from being reconciled, the Pakins' response was to slay him with knives in his own council chamber. His brother

(likewise an Ackal) took the throne as Pakin III, in honor of his slain sibling. Pakin III is no gentle conciliator. He will send his hordes to the ends of the world to track down the Pakin Pretender, and will not rest until the Pretender's head decorates the palace roof in Daltigoth.

For all his ferocity, the current emperor is a just and honorable ruler. But his opponent is neither. The Pakin Pretender is by all accounts a vicious, treacherous man, and potentially a worse enemy than his Ackal rival. His troops are little more than bandits. They have sacked peaceful villages near the Hylo border, robbed caravans, and tortured Tarsan merchants to death.

Master Vyka, of the White Robe Council, tells me the Pretender does not blanch from practicing black magic. Among his closest advisers are known Black Robes, including one Spannuth Grane, believed to have been involved in the murder of Pakin II and under sentence of death in Ergoth for his various sorcerous crimes.

Assure the emperor of our best wishes in his struggle against the Pretender. At the same time, we are sending a fleet of fifty galleys to Hylo to impress the kender with the power of Tarsis. They are feeling pressed these days, not only by imperial power, but by the Pakin Pretender's forces. Our High Admiral, Anovenax, has instructions to land the army of General Tylocost if need be, to convince the kender of the wisdom of retaining their ancient trading relationship with Tarsis. That relationship is worth thirty million gold crowns a year to us, or a quarter part of all revenues of the city. Our hegemony over Hylo must be preserved—without war, if possible, but preserved nonetheless!

May Shinare guide and protect you, lady. Remember you are going to a splendid but savage place, where men kill for honor and massacre for glory. As a woman, you may find the Ergothians' notions of honor peculiar, but you are well-equipped to take advantage of their weakness for feminine glamour. I trust a woman of your experience, wit, and talent will accomplish far more in Daltigoth than I ever could. And

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if not—well, Lord Tylocost has fifty thousand mercenaries ready to take ship to Hyló.

All success to you, Lady Hanira! The hopes of your city go with you!

(sealed)

VALGOLD, PRINCE OF VERGERONE
from the Griffin Palace

C h a p t e r 1

A Strange Harvest



Again and again the blade rose, lingered for a moment in the clear spring air, then fell to earth with a thud. Each blow cleaved in two a clod of red-brown clay. Inside each broken clump dark soil gleamed, heavy with moisture from the snows of winter. Night still held enough chill to preserve crusts of ice in the deep shade of the woods, but here in the onion patch the newly turned ground had thawed and was soft.

Tol labored tirelessly, pulverizing the weed-woven dirt. His father had plowed the field at dawn. While his father returned the borrowed bullock to their neighbor Farak, Tol finished preparing the soil. He had to be done by midday, when his mother and sisters would come with dried onion bulbs, carefully stored through the winter in the root cellar beneath their hut. By sundown the field would be lined with little hillocks, each tiny mound holding a single bulb. If the hard yellow seedlings survived until summer (and fewer than half would), each onion would mother three or four others. With good rains and fair taxes, Tol's family would harvest enough to feed themselves and have some left over to barter for things they did not grow—like apples, Tol's favorite fruit.

Halfway through one swing, Tol heard a strange sound. For the first time he broke his rhythm, hoe held high over his head. The sound was a distant rumble that rose in volume, then fell, seeming to fade into the hills behind him.

Tol lowered the hoe. He turned his head slowly, trying to gauge the source of the strange noise. It seemed to begin beyond the two tall hills northeast of the onion patch. They often masked thunder, making it hard to judge the distance of an oncoming storm. A breeze lifted his long, loose hair and tossed it in his face. He combed the thick brown strands aside and squinted against the morning sun.

Another sound reached his ears. He recognized this one—though he heard it seldom—and knew it for an ominous portent. Bright and hard, it was the clash of metal on metal. He realized then the strange ebbing and flowing noise must mean a battle was raging nearby.

Tol took a step backward, uncertain. Should he run home and warn his family? He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of their homestead. It was five minutes' walk away, but if his father returned and found him gone, his work not yet finished—Tol shook his head at the thought of Bakal's certain wrath.

Last autumn there had been other battles. Swarms of mounted men, clad in bronze and iron, had fought to possess the Great Road that ran through the southern end of the province. Once, Tol had seen a small mob of warriors bearing green streamers. They rode helter-skelter north, pursued by a larger band of fighters under a scarlet banner. The green riders had burned six farms and killed the local healer, Old Kinzen, when he couldn't save their leader from his wound. Tol's father and his cronies sat around the fire all winter, drinking plum dew from a stone jug and talking in anxious voices about war. The emperor's Great Horde was fighting itself, they muttered. Men of Ergoth were making war on each other.

Tol understood little of what was said. The affairs of men were not for women and children, and the ways of warriors were even more remote. All he knew was, where men went with horse and sword, blood and fire followed.

Suddenly a truly mighty shout went up, echoing off the intervening hills and penetrating Tol's worried ruminations.

He heard a terrific crash, as if all the trees in the forest had fallen down at once. The plowed earth beneath his feet shivered. His fingers tightened nervously around the hoe handle.

The strange ground tremor did not subside, but grew stronger. An indeterminate rumble of combat gave way to the sounds of individual hoofbeats and shouting voices. It rose steadily in volume. The fight was coming his way!

He cast about for a hiding place. The onion field was a shallow, bowl-shaped depression between three hills, about thirty paces long and half that wide. Other than Tol himself, the only thing in it that morning was a chest-high pile of compost his father had dumped the day before. Formed from the family's refuse collected all winter, mixed with the scrapings of the chicken coop, it was a malodorous heap.

Tol didn't hesitate. He sprinted for the compost pile, leaping nimbly over the newly turned sod. Better to lie in filth than be trampled by a warrior's charger, or hacked to death by an iron sword!

Before he reached cover, a lone horse appeared in the cleft below the north hill. Tol's panicked dash halted abruptly when he spied the coal-black beast. It was an enormous animal, and it was riderless.

When the horse galloped by, eyes bulging, teeth bared, foamy sweat streaking its ebony neck, Tol saw why it was so terrified. Gripping the animal's mane was a man's hand, fingers tightly knotted into the long strands. Severed below the elbow, the limb thudded rhythmically against the horse's neck. Blood stained the blaze on the horse's chest.

Hardly had the first runaway steed gone by when two more rounded the base of the hill. Neighing frantically, they weaved this way and that, almost colliding. They shied from Tol and cantered off. One animal had a wound on its rump, but neither bore a rider, or even part of one.

Someone blew a ram's horn close by. The sudden blast sent Tol scrambling again for the compost pile. With the wooden blade of his hoe, he began hacking out a niche large enough to hide in.

He'd made only a shallow hole when a fourth horse appeared. Unlike the others, this animal had a rider, slumped forward over its neck. The horse came on at a steady trot. He was a magnificent stallion, broad and strong, the color of morning mist. Heavy mail trapping coated him from head to tail, the small iron rings sewn to rich crimson cloth. He came directly to the amazed Tol, and stopped. The reins fell from the unmoving rider's hands.

At first Tol could only stare dumbfounded at the apparition looming over him. When the horse dropped its head to nuzzle his chest, he started violently, but regained his wits enough to speak.

"Sir? Master?" he said tentatively. The slumped rider did not reply, so Tol edged closer. The huge, dappled-gray horse watched him closely but did not shy, so he circled to the side to see the man's face.

The rider was a burly, yellow-bearded fellow. He'd lost his helm, but his fair hair was still matted from its weight. Fresh blood dripped from his slack fingers, and a nasty gash scored his left temple.

"Sir?" said Tol again, daring to touch the rider's dangling hand. The limp fingers suddenly seized his arm. Tol tried to pull free, but the man's grip was surprisingly strong.

"Boy," he rasped, "don't make a sound if you want to live!"

Tol hadn't yelled when he was grabbed, and he wasn't about to do so now. He simply nodded.

"All is lost. The Pakins have won the battle. They will come for me," the man murmured. He coughed, and his hand relaxed, releasing Tol.

The ram's horn bleated again, very near, and Tol understood its significance. Hunters used horns to signal each other when tracking prey. This man's enemies were hunting him like a wild animal.

Tol slapped the horse sharply on the flank. The powerful beast gazed at him contemptuously. Surprised, Tol picked up the reins and tried to lead the horse away. The broad hooves never budged. It was like trying to shift an oak tree.

There was a rumble of many hoofbeats, growing louder, and Tol was torn. If he ran away, the unconscious warrior would certainly be caught and killed. If he stayed, the man's enemies might slay him too!

His gaze fell upon the hoe, lying at his feet where he'd dropped it. The sight of it gave him an idea.

He planted his hands against the horse's side and shoved. To his relief, the startled animal shuffled sideways a few steps. Tol cupped his hands under the injured man's left heel and heaved. The warrior was big, and weighted down with much metal, but the gods were with Tol. The man rolled off his saddle and fell heavily to the ground.

Tol tore the scarlet band from the warrior's sleeve and laid it over his face. That done, he attacked the compost pile once more with his hoe, flinging rotting leaves and manure over the unconscious man. Not satisfied with the amount he was shifting, he dropped to his knees and plunged his hands into the stinking heap. In short order the fallen warrior was completely buried.

Filthy up to his elbows, Tol confronted the horse, shouting and waving his arms. The stolid animal merely snorted, short plumes of mist furling around its wide nostrils.

"Stupid beast! Get away! How can I hide your master with you here?"

The war-horse only shook its big head and refused to move. In desperation, Tol did something his father had told him never to do: he swatted the animal hard on the nose, a blow no horse will bear.

The gray stallion finally woke to anger, rearing high and lashing out with its metal-shod hooves. Tol dodged briskly. A single blow from those heavy hooves could crack his skull open like a walnut.

The outraged horse trotted away. It followed the natural draw of the field, disappearing in the direction of the south woods. Hardly had the stallion merged into the morning haze than several riders burst from the defile. The lead warrior spotted Tol immediately and shouted. Whipping his long

sword in a circle around his head, he led three companions toward the boy.

Tol's heart hammered against his ribs, but he concentrated on working the soil with his hoe and on keeping his eyes from straying to the compost pile. In moments he was surrounded by mounted men, each wearing a strip of green cloth tied around his right upper arm.

"It's just a peasant," said one, reining in his prancing charger. "And a smelly one at that."

"They're all smelly," said another, bearded face twisted in disgust.

"Look here, boy," said a third, whose helm bore a green feather plume. "How long have you been here?"

"All morning, master," Tol replied. He was surprised by his own coolness. Though his heart was racing, his tongue was calm. No quaver spoiled his voice.

"Seen any riders come by? Riders with red trappings?"

"Yes, my lord." Tol ceased his labors with the hoe, but kept his eyes downcast.

"How many?" asked the man in the green-plumed helmet. Tol shrugged, and the tip of a nicked iron saber pressed into his ear. "Loosen your tongue, boy, or I'll have it out for good."

"Three horses, good master, with no men on them! And one with a rider."

All the warriors but one had spoken. Unlike the rest, this fellow wore a closed helm. Its fiercely grinning, hammered bronze visor covered his face completely. As tall as his companions, he was of slighter build, and even to Tol's un-schooled eyes his arms seemed finer and more costly.

"What did the rider look like?" the visored man asked, voice low but carrying.

Tol looked up at him, then quickly back down at the ground. The evil, grinning metal visage filled him with dread. Even though he was farthest away and his sword was sheathed, the visored warrior somehow seemed the most dangerous of them all.

"He was a big man, lord," Tol said truthfully, "with hair

and beard the color of straw."

His answer obviously pleased them. "Odovar!" said the horn bearer, glancing at the masked man. "Which way did he go, boy?"

Tol indicated the tracks of the big man's horse. "Yonder, lords."

Standing in his stirrups, the rider with the ram's horn put it to his lips. He blew a loud, wavering note. Iron blades flashed as each warrior lifted his weapon high.

The visored warrior said, "Remember, men: the weight of Odovar's head in gold to him who brings it to me."

With whoops and yells, the riders spurred their massive horses and galloped away.

The visored man lingered and Tol felt his gaze on him. Curiosity overcoming his natural caution, Tol ventured to ask, "My lord, who are you? Why do you fight?"

To the boy's surprise, the man deigned to answer.

"I am Grane, commander of the northern host of the Pakin Successor. I am sworn to return the house of Pakin to its rightful place on the imperial throne," he said. His voice betrayed amusement. "Does that satisfy you, boy?"

Tol nodded dumbly, though in fact the words meant nothing to him.

Grane reached back to a leather saddlebag. He lifted the flap and thrust his hand inside. When he withdrew it, something brown and furry squirmed in his gauntleted fist. He tossed the creature to the ground and muttered words Tol could not understand. A strange breeze began to blow, rushing inward, toward the fist-sized brown creature.

The furry form swelled and as it expanded its fur darkened from brown to black. Terrible yowls sounded from its mouth, as though the growing was painful in the extreme. Horrified, Tol stepped back quickly, almost stumbling over the pile of compost. When it stopped growing and raised its head, Tol gasped. The night-black creature had long fangs and green eyes, vertically slit like a cat's, but was half again as big as any panther Tol had ever seen.

"Vult, seek. Find Odovar," commanded Grane. The leonine beast uncoiled muscular limbs, revealing fur-covered, manlike fingers and toes. It lowered its nose to the ground. Catching a scent, it opened its jaws and let out a low, wavering yowl that made the hair on Tol's neck rise. Its fanged maw was large enough to swallow Tol's head.

"Find him, Vult. Find Odovar!"

The hulking cat creature stalked forward, and Tol was suddenly very afraid. Could this unnatural beast scent its prey through the moldering compost?

Eyeing him up and down, the panther sniffed Tol. A snarl gurgled in its throat. Tol forced himself to remain still.

The great panther's head swiveled toward the rotting manure pile. It drew in a deep breath. Plainly disgusted, the beast padded away, along the track left by the hidden man's horse.

"You have lived through a great day, boy," Grane said, snapping his reins. "Tell your children you saw the victor of the Succession War this day!"

He urged his mount to rear, then rode off behind the creature Vult, sunlight shining on the gilded peak of his garish helm.

Tol watched man and panther vanish into the woods. He waited several interminable minutes, just to be certain they wouldn't return, then hurried to the pile of compost. He clawed away the manure until he found the scrap of red cloth over the hidden man's face. He whisked it off and saw the man's eyes were open.

"Are they gone?" the warrior muttered. Tol nodded, and the fellow sat up, scattering clumps of compost. "Grane, the blood drinker! Someday, I'll—" He made a fist, but winced from the effort.

"Help me up, boy," he said. Tol gave him his shoulder, and the hulking blond warrior rose unsteadily to his feet.

Looking around, he asked, "My horse—how did you get Ironheart to leave me?" Tol explained what he'd done. The warrior barked a short, harsh laugh. "You're lucky he didn't

stamp you into your own manure pile, boy!"

Tol staggered a bit under the weight of the big man. "My lord, you are called Odovar?" he asked.

"Aye, I am Odovar, marshal of the Eastern Hundred. Grane and his damned Pakins have ambushed my troops, but I'm not done yet." Odovar squinted at the sun to orient himself. "It's a long walk back to Juramona. Have you a horse, boy?"

Tol confessed he did not, then asked, "What is Juramona, lord?"

"The imperial seat of this province, and my stronghold. It lies two days' ride due east of here." Odovar coughed, grimacing. "Two days' ride is eight days' walking, and my head is still thundering from Grane's blow. Fair broke my helmet, it did."

Pushing Tol away, Odovar tried to walk unaided, but his knees buckled immediately. He sank on his haunches.

"I'll not make it with the land heaving under my feet like this!" he declared. "Help me, boy."

Again Tol braced him, and Lord Odovar managed to stand once more. "Lend me that stick," he commanded, and Tol gave him the hoe. The warrior braced the wooden blade into his armpit and essayed a step. The hoe handle was short but stout, and bore the big man without cracking.

"This is good seasoned ash," Odovar said. "I'll take it with me."

Tol winced. His father had made that hoe. It was the only one they had. Without it, planting the onion crop would be much harder. Even so, he dared not deny so powerful a lord.

"Don't look so downcast," Odovar said. "I'll pay for it. One gold piece will buy an armload of hoes."

The warrior limped a few more steps, then halted, swaying drunkenly. "Damn Grane and all the Pakins!" he thundered. "My head feels like a poached egg! Come with me, boy. I need you."

"But my father—my family—"

"Do as I say!"

Worried but obedient, Tol put himself under Odovar's other arm. Between the strong boy and the sturdy hoe, the

injured warrior made better progress. He asked Tol his name and age. To this last, the boy could only shrug and say he didn't know.

"You don't know?" Odovar repeated, and Tol looked away, ashamed of his ignorance. "Well, you're a strongly built lad, whatever your age."

The tumult of battle had faded, and once the marshal and the boy passed through the cleft in the hills Tol beheld the scene of the fight for the first time. Spread below in a narrow gap in the trees were dead men and horses, heaps of them. Tol had seen dead men before, but never so many at once. The air was heavy with the smell of blood, like the farmyard when his father slaughtered a pig.

"They took us by surprise," Odovar said, grunting. "Ambushed in column we were, blades sheathed and spears ported. We had not a dog's chance."

Most of the corpses bore red armbands. A few wore green, like the mysterious Grane. Tol asked about the significance of the colors.

"Red is the clan color of the Ackals, rightful rulers of this land," Odovar said, touching the scarlet cloth tied around his own arm. "Green is for the house of Pakin, who claims the throne of Ergoth for their lord, the Pakin Successor."

"Ergoth? What is Ergoth?" Tol asked. Out of the many confusing words, he seized on the one he'd heard his father use.

Odovar stopped hobbling and regarded him with surprise. "All of this!" he said, waving a hand to the horizon. "This land is Ergoth. I am Ergoth, and you. We are all subjects of his glorious majesty, Pakin the Third, rightful emperor of Ergoth since the assassination of his brother."

Now Tol was truly confused. The concept of "Ergoth" eluded him, but no more so than the notion that Lord Odovar could be the subject of someone named Pakin, when Pakins were the very enemies he was fighting. Questions formed on his lips, but he held them back for fear of seeming stupid before the great lord.

In the midst of the narrow battlefield there was movement.

A chestnut horse floundered, tangled by its own reins. Odovar sent Tol to free it. The boy unwound the leather traces from its legs and the animal bounded to its feet. He brought the horse to Odovar. With much heaving and grunting, the warrior managed to mount the tall horse. Odovar's face was ash-gray now, and beads of sweat stood out on his brow.

Hoe on his shoulder, Tol prepared to return to the onion field now that Odovar had found a mount. However, the warrior chief tossed the reins to him, saying, "Lead him, boy. If I try to ride, I'll fall off for sure."

The sun was nearly at its apex. By now, his mother and sisters, laden with spring bulbs, would have set out for the onion field. He had to get back. His father would be angry when he saw he hadn't finished his work.

He tried to explain this to Lord Odovar, but the warrior interrupted him—or perhaps hadn't even heard him, so pale and sickly did he look.

"Go east," Odovar said, his breathing labored and loud. "Whatever happens . . . go east. Get me . . . to Juramona. My people will . . . reward you well." He then slumped forward, unconscious, arms hanging limply on either side of the horse's neck.

Tol twisted the reins in his hands, mind working furiously. He could leave the wounded marshal here and return to work, but the man would likely die if he did. On the other hand, Odovar's request was daunting. Tol had never been more than a day's walk from home, and then only with his father. He had no idea what lay beyond the green hills east of the farm.

Juramona. The very word seemed mysterious and remote, like a mountain on Solin, the white moon. Could Tol actually go to Juramona? Could he leave his family and make such a fantastic journey?

It was Odovar's mention of a reward that finally settled the question. If Tol returned home with gold, his father wouldn't beat him for abandoning his chores half done.

Laying the reins over one shoulder and his hoe on the other, Tol began the trek east.



The land beyond the hills was flat and dotted with trees. From time to time Tol spotted riders in the distance. Since he couldn't identify them as friend or foe, he hid himself and Lord Odovar until they had gone by.

Mid-afternoon found Tol's stomach knotted with hunger. He should've been home eating his mother's beans and cabbage. Instead of enjoying that hearty fare he was wandering this endless expanse of grassland, leading a horse with a dying man on it. This was not how he imagined the day would go when he awoke that morning.

He entered a grove of pines. The horse, until now placidly following Tol's lead, began to pull away toward the left. Tol smelled water too, so he let the horse choose the path. They soon came to a small brook.

Tol tied the reins to a sapling and fell on his belly to lap the cold water alongside the animal. Looking up from his drinking, he saw that although Odovar's eyes were still closed, his color had improved. His butter-colored mustache puffed in and out with each breath.

Tol wandered out of the pines, kicking through the tall brown grass in search of anything edible—nuts, seeds, wind-fall fruit. There was nothing. The land hereabouts was as clean as his family's root cellar come spring.

As he stood bemoaning his hunger, he suddenly heard voices. A line of spearpoints advanced through the trees. Tol dropped to his knees. He couldn't get back to Odovar without being seen, so he waited nervously to learn who the strangers might be.

They were warriors, though not so richly armed as Grane or Lord Odovar. Their helmets were simple pots, and their breastplates boiled leather studded with bronze scales. Most were bearded. Each carried a spear with a short strip of cloth tied behind its head, and each wore a similar strip of cloth tied around his left arm. The cloths were red.

Tol popped up so suddenly the lead horses reared. Spearpoints swung down, aiming for his chest.

"Who goes there?" demanded the rider in the center of the group of ten. His helmet bore a brass crest and his auburn whiskers were sprinkled with gray.

"Friend! Friend!" Tol cried, holding his hands high.

"It's only a peasant boy," said a nearer warrior. He lifted his spear away from Tol's face. "Too bad he's not a rabbit. I could eat a rabbit just now."

"I could eat a peasant brat, myself," said another, and the company laughed.

"My lords, who is your master?" Tol asked quickly, wondering if men of war did indeed eat children when they could not get rabbits.

"We serve the marshal of the Eastern Hundred," said the one with the gray-flecked beard and brass-crested helm. "Odovar of Juramona—or was, till he perished this day in battle."

Relief coursed through Tol and he cried, "No! He lives yet!"

Brass Helm guided his mount closer. "What say you, boy? Have you news of Lord Odovar?"

"He lives! He is yonder, in those pines!"

Plainly unimpressed, the elder warrior called out, "My lord Odovar! Are you there? It is Egrin, of the Household Guards!"

Wind sighing through the grass was the only answer.

"He is there," Tol insisted, "but hurt. A man named Grane hit him on the head."

The name echoed through the mounted men like a thunderbolt.

"Grane!" Egrin exclaimed. He gestured, and one of the men thrust his spear through the collar of Tol's jerkin. Using the pommel of his saddle as a fulcrum, he hoisted the boy up onto his toes.

Ignoring Tol's protests, Egrin snapped, "Watch him. The rest of you, spread out. This smells like treachery to me. If it's a trap, spit that boy like a partridge and get out of here. Report back to Juramona. Understand?" The warrior holding Tol nodded.

The riders made a half-circle and approached the pine copse quietly. Egrin went in, and let out a shout.

“By the gods! Lord Odovar is here!”

Tol found himself dropped unceremoniously to the ground. His erstwhile captor spurred forward, joining his comrades by the brook. Fingering the hole in his good leather shirt, Tol followed.

Egrin had Odovar sitting upright on the chestnut horse and was holding a waterskin to his lips. The burly chieftain gulped the contents. His face reddened, and he pushed the neck of the skin away.

“Mishas preserve me!” he spluttered. “You give a dying man *water*? Have you nothing better?”

Egrin smiled and pulled a hide-wrapped bottle from his saddlebag. “Applejack, my lord?” he said, offering it to his commander. Odovar drew the stopper and took a long swig.

“I rejoice at your survival, my lord,” said Egrin. “We thought you dead in the ambush.”

“So I would have been, if not for this boy.” Odovar wiped droplets of hard cider from his mustache with the back of a dirty hand. He told the company Tol’s name, then drained the bottle and demanded an account of the battle from Egrin.

The veteran soldier reported that he and his men, sent by Odovar to scout the woods ahead of the main band, had been cut off by a superior force of Pakin warriors. When it looked like they would cut their way through anyway, a wall of fire leaped up between them and the Pakins, driving Egrin back. By the time he rallied his men and returned, the Pakins had vanished, and there was no sign of Lord Odovar, alive or dead.

“Strange to say, my lord, after the fire had gone, there were no ashes or coals, no sign of burning at all,” Egrin finished.

They exchanged a meaningful look and Odovar said, “So, Grane is using his magic against us. We will return to Juramona at once. The Pakins may move to strike there.”

Egrin formed up the men and took the reins of Odovar’s horse himself.

Through all this Tol had been squatting to one side, watching and listening. So the great lord Grane, whoever he was, had magic on his side. That explained the strange creature he’d drawn from the small pouch on his saddle. Tol knew little of magic. His parents spoke of it only to curse it, but the rare passing mage or itinerant cleric who stopped at the farm for water or food seemed kindly enough to Tol. One had even done tricks to amuse him and his sisters, levitating stones and making doves appear from his floppy hat.

As the warriors set out, Tol stood. It was nearly dusk, and a bite in the air announced the cold night to come. He would have a long, chilly walk back to the farm.

A big roan horse blocked his path. Tol looked up and saw Egrin studying him.

“What about the boy, my lord?” the elder warrior asked. “What shall we do with him?”

“Eh? Do with him?” repeated Odovar, his words slurred by cider and fatigue. He shook his head as if to clear it and said forcefully, “Bring him!”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Tol was surprised, but before he could speak, Egrin leaned down and took hold of his collar. With no obvious strain, the warrior hauled the boy off his feet and set him on the saddle behind him.

Torn between curiosity to see this Juramona and fear of leaving his family, Tol cleared his throat and said, “My folks will wonder what’s happened to me.”

“We’ll send word,” Lord Odovar muttered, eyelids closing. His head drooped.

Egrin gave the boy a shrug, implying they would get little else from the exhausted marshal.

They rode out as the sun set at their backs, stretching long shadows from the sparse trees and washing the plain in strong colors. The clouds above seemed afire, blazing with the bold red color of Lord Odovar’s Ackal clan.

If it was an omen, it was not one Tol found any comfort in.