

Chapter 1

Foreboding

Prince Fiad paced the anteroom, his temper wearing dangerously thin. A Crown Prince of Bhutan was not used to being kept waiting, especially by a Thracian clerk. Others sat in the room, each looking equally frustrated. The clerk in question sat by a dark, wooden table polished to a high sheen, signing a stack of papers. He looked nervous amongst such eminent company, clearly sensing their frustration. He cast Fiad a sideways glance, but turned away when the prince scowled angrily back. The clerk looked down at the paper in front of him as though absorbed in its contents.

Fiad continued to pace around the room like a trapped animal. He looked about at the other commanders, assembled from nearby kingdoms. Previously he had only met Tharn Harlester of West Meath. Sitting by Harlester's side was Thorlar, a dwarf chieftain from Tubarl, a small kingdom deep in the heart of the Charlot Mountains. Fiad had never met a dwarf before; that privilege was usually reserved for the merchant castes, eager to trade for minerals. He liked the dwarf, perhaps because he was such a dependable figure, reminiscent of the mountains from which he hailed. His eyes, partially hidden beneath thick shaggy eyebrows, were a deep blue which seemed to make his gaze all the more piercing.

Like most dwarves, he wore his hair and beard in long braids. That morning he favoured a thick leather jerkin, trimmed with fur and wore stout boots that looked well used. His axe was missing as the Thracians allowed no one to bear arms in the presence of their monarch, Queen Catriona, and certainly not since the assassination of their king.

Thorlar and Harlester were in conversation and, although their voices were low, Fiad sensed their impatience. Harlester dressed in bright silks and his attitude was cavalier, but Fiad knew better. He was a good friend, a fine swordsman and very brave.

He was a good looking man whose company was often sought by ladies of various courts. He enjoyed life to the fullest and nothing seemed to dampen his spirit, not even when challenged by various husbands. His off-hand

manner had more than once threatened his career. Now it was almost his trademark and he seemed immensely pleased when he heard what others thought of his carefree attitude.

Fiad envied Harlester; Fiad was much more impatient, but perhaps that could be attributed to his youth. He was full of bravado and eager to prove his worth on the field of battle.

Fiad glanced at the other commanders and his eyes were immediately drawn to King Palastor. Suppressing a shudder, his first impression was of fear. He, like many others, could not help but liken the albino to a demon. Palastor was unnaturally thin, and his flesh and hair were purest white. It was his eyes that made Fiad shudder though; they were scarlet and seemed to bore into Fiad's soul. Like Harlester, Palastor favoured bright coloured clothing and, sitting side by side, the two men were difficult on the eyes.

Turning away, he went to a window, contemplating the vast army camped outside the city walls. He commanded twenty thousand troops while Harlester had fifteen thousand infantry and five thousand cavalry. Thorlar had led three thousand dwarves from the Charlot Mountains, each bearing chain mail and axe. With close to thirty thousand troops from Thrace and twenty thousand from Allund and three thousand from Gilfillan, they had a mighty army. More troops were arriving from the outlying countries every day. Fiad's confidence was high and he could not understand why they waited; surely the best option now was to carry the battle to the enemy.

At that moment Tharn Ballan entered from the interconnecting door to the throne room.

"Queen Catriona will see the commanders now," he stated to the clerk before returning inside the room. The clerk looked grateful as he rose and held open the door, letting the others file past. Fiad went first and looked in interest upon the long throne room. On the wall a large portrait of King Sharroch who had been assassinated at the start of the recent conflict, stared accusingly down upon them.

Queen Catriona sat at one end of the table, tall and graceful, with a beautiful complexion and wide gentle eyes, although presently she looked troubled. Behind her, standing amongst the shadows, stood another figure and it took Fiad a few moments to recognise Astalus, the court wizard. He was a young man, dressed in a long brown robe tied at the waist with a silken cord. Fiad was surprised to see him for he had only recently returned from a trip to find an ancient Eldric city. He had heard that the wizard had virtually locked himself in his tower these last three nights. Beneath his arm Astalus clutched a thick leather book and, by his expression, he was loath to be parted from it. For a moment Fiad was shocked by Astalus' paleness. The eyes, too, looked

strangely haunted. Shuddering he turned his attention away from the mage and back to the others. Patiently he waited for them to be seated and, as soon as silence descended, he addressed the Thracian queen.

“The army is ready to march,” he declared abruptly, pacing across the room and halting before the portrait of her father. “We should confront Trosgarth now, before they have a chance to rebuild their army. *We must* take advantage of their recent defeat.”

Catriona looked briefly annoyed that Fiad had chosen to stand beneath the portrait of her father. Was it a deliberate ploy to remind her courtiers that a woman now ruled?

“It would be foolhardy to march on Trosgarth,” she said. “An attack would have been viable with Kaplyn leading us. With the aid of the dragon, there had been a real possibility of our winning a war. But he has gone, and we do not know where.”

Fiad felt a twinge of jealousy at the mention of Kaplyn’s name and did not like the feeling. “Have you looked from the walls upon our army? Never since the Krell Wars has such an army been assembled. We do not need a dragon to win this war.”

“In the Krell Wars, we had the Eldric and their sorcerers,” Catriona reminded him.

Fiad suppressed his anger. “And now we must face the fact that they, too, have gone. If we lack their power, then the enemy is similarly handicapped. You said yourself that the army besieging CarCamel was led by only one sorcerer. I believe that we can deal with such a threat by might of arms alone, and that does not even include the dwarves of Thandor, for they will surely aid us, as they have before.”

Catriona did not look convinced. “That might not be true. Thorlar of Tubarl has informed me that his people have not heard from Thandor for many generations, and his envoys have failed to return.”

For a moment there was silence before Catriona continued. “It is not my advice that we march,” she urged the assembled men. The Prophecy is not yet fulfilled and we do not have a king to lead us. I would caution that we wait, learn more of the enemy’s disposition and increase our strength.”

Fiad was frustrated by not getting his own way, and the mention of the Prophecy angered him. His own people acknowledged him to be the King mentioned in those cryptic lines and, by a roundabout way, his birth could be explained by earth, fire and water. He decided to change tactics.

“What of Astalus then?” he asked, gesturing towards the silent figure. “What of his quest? I have been told that he returned three days ago and yet we have not been briefed about his findings.”

Many eyes turned towards the wizard who took two paces forward, although he remained partially concealed by the shadows as if they followed him. Catriona was watching Astalus with foreboding in her eyes.

“I have returned from Namthrall with Haft Commander Tallin. Using magic, I summoned the city from the ruins, so that before us a mighty fortress rose. I entered the city, leaving Tallin and his command outside. In my absence, a large force of krell attacked them and all but Tallin were wiped out. The two of us were lucky to escape with our lives.”

He fell silent for a moment and removed the book from beneath his arm. “But our journey was not in vain. I have returned with an Eldric volume which I believe to be the single most significant book of our time. It contains Eldric spells, the power of which we have only been able to imagine before.”

An excited murmur went up from the assembled men. As it died down Astalus continued. His voice was quiet and yet he held everyone’s attention.

“I have found one spell in particular which is of great consequence,” he stated solemnly, pausing for effect. “With it — I can summon dragons. Not *one*, but as *many* as I desire.”

The noise within the room was deafening as the commanders all tried to speak at once. Fiad held up a hand, and gradually silence fell. Glancing at Catriona, Fiad caught her looking at Astalus with irritation, and he guessed that she had not wanted him to reveal that particular piece of information.

“This is news *indeed*. Can you cast the spell?” Fiad asked.

Astalus nodded. “I’ve spent the past three nights in study. As you are no doubt aware, we Akrane lack the power of the Narlassar, but I have discovered to some extent the source of their power. I, at least, can now use their spells and, as a consequence, I have seen the dragon’s world. It’s a land of tall mountains and deep lakes. A dragon, a brown, came to my bidding. It was eager to help us for they hate demons with a passion.”

Again the voices of the assembled men rose in heated debate, but Fiad insisted on silence. Turning to Catriona, he was surprised by how pale she seemed.

“The army is ready,” he declared firmly. Several shouts of “Aye” from the assembled men confirmed their support. “With the dragons’ aid, we will be invincible.”

“Is it the will of everyone present that the army should march?” Catriona asked. She knew that the merchants would support a *yes* vote; they were horrified by the size of the army and were already counting the cost of feeding it.

Each of the assembled commanders supported the motion. By the conclusion of the meeting it was decided to send the army under Fiad’s

command north. In total, ninety thousand men would go, leaving only a few thousand to guard the city. Fiad and Harlester each promised an additional ten thousand troops to defend the city once they had been mustered.

At that moment the clouds parted and, for a few moments, warm sunshine flooded into the large hall. Within the room the commanders blinked uncertainly at each other, being unused to the bright light after so many months of darkness. Suddenly they felt as though an immense weight had been lifted from their overburdened shoulders, and all around the table smiles broke out. Only Catriona remained grim. Fiad looked at the queen and knew that he had won, but at what cost?

For several weeks the city was in mayhem. Vast quantities of supplies were required for the expedition and they had to await reinforcements. Few realised how much administration was required for such an endeavour. By the end of the first week, a task force was assembled in the main courtyard, led by Tharn Orrin. Their aim was to secure Pantril, the most northerly of Thrace's towns. The bulk of the army would rendezvous with them there one week later. The task force would forage the land and stockpile food to resupply the army as it passed through. They would then form the rear-guard.

Many of CarCamel's citizens turned out to watch the task force leave and the crowd cheered heartily while the troops looked uncertainly back. Too many remembered the recent conflict and, unlike Prince Fiad, few dreamt of being heroes.

As the troops left the city, merchants' caravans entered from the surrounding kingdoms. It was a time for profit as wooden wagons rattled through the cobbled streets to replenish the city's stocks, depleted by the recent conflict.

The preparations for the main army reached a climax the day before they were scheduled to leave. A lull before the oncoming storm settled over the city, and many took this time to bid a final farewell to loved ones. The troops from distant cities hosted noisy parties, eager to show that they were unafraid. The younger troops looked up to the veterans while they turned inward to look for courage. Many were thankful for the cold, grateful for its excuse to hide their fear.

Chapter 2

Departure

Nate breathed in the cool night air, absently registering the smell of wood-smoke, horses and men, as he surveyed the scene before him, marvelling at what he saw. His haft and the bulk of the Allund army, were camped on a small hill in front of CarCamel, and, before him as far as his eye could see, were a myriad of campfires disappearing into the distance like tiny fireflies. The walls of CarCamel rose before them and, atop these, Nate could see small watch fires burning brightly on the battlements.

Before the war, Nate had been a farmer and never in his life had he dreamed of seeing so many men assembled in one place. Some said there were over one hundred thousand troops. His haft had left the city only two days earlier, making room in the barracks for other troops who would defend the city once the army was gone. With the absence of a roof and four walls, the chill of the night penetrated his old bones. A tent was poor comfort, he thought, shivering, pulling his woollen cloak tighter about his shoulders. An itch started under his breastplate and he tried to ignore it, feeling frustrated that an itch always started some place you could not reach.

Nate turned his attention back to the camp. It was hard to believe that, at each fire, there were several unseen bodies. Nate looked up at the dark sky. No stars were visible and he cursed the cold. He imagined stars twinkling brightly on a warm summer evening, comparing them with the army's campfires.

Imagine, the stars could be like these camp fires with the spirits of our dead ancestors huddled around them, he thought. Perhaps that is where the King in the Prophecy is right now, looking down on the army and deciding when to come to our aid. He could almost hear the braying of trumpets as a host of dead soldiers flowed from the night sky to swell their ranks as they marched on Trosgarth. However, the thought of death quickly brought his thoughts back to reality. Thad's death, and that of the other good men he knew, was still fresh in his mind.

“Damn this itch,” he muttered sullenly, knowing he would remember Thad for the rest of his life, which might not be too long with the battle imminent. Suddenly he could stand it no longer.

“Why do we have to wear this ridiculous armour?” he announced to no one in particular as he flung his cloak to one side. In irritation he tried to hook a finger under the breastplate to itch the stubborn spot.

Sarin laughed, enjoying watching the older man’s struggle. Nate glared sullenly back as though daring him to laugh again.

“Take it off if you want,” Harlam offered. “We are not moving out until dawn. You need to relax while you can. Once we start there will be precious little rest, so take advantage now.”

Nate was glad of the sudden conversation. His thoughts had been turning gloomy and he found himself wanting to talk. The itch had miraculously gone and for that mercy, at least, he thanked the Kalanth. Swiftly he pulled his cloak about himself. “It’s these coarse shirts,” he complained. “Why can’t we wear something less irritating? I bet the officers don’t have to wear this rubbish.”

Harlam shrugged and drew closer to the fire. “You should be glad that you have such a fine garment to wear and, if I were an officer, I would be wearing the same. It’s thick and warm, and absorbs sweat better than any other material.”

Nate sneered, shaking his head. “If I was an officer, I would have a silk shirt and be glad of the comfort.”

By his side Sarin stirred, a sure sign that he was about to speak. “Where are we going tomorrow?” he asked, somewhat timidly.

“Tomorrow?” Harlam questioned, “We’ll probably not get very far, not with all the wagons. It will take us about a week to reach the Thracian border. From there...? I am not sure what lies directly north. We might have to cross KinKassack. That’s an evil place by all accounts. And there is also Thandor, the ancient dwarven kingdom. Tomorrow will be but a stroll, probably no more than ten miles.”

Sarin nodded. As a soldier, he had learnt not to ask too many questions.

“I was told an army of dwarves joined us yesterday. I think that they are camped over there somewhere,” Nate said, turning away from the city and pointing. “We should try to find them. I’d like to meet a dwarf. By all accounts they have a rare brew that will raise our spirits, if you take my meaning.”

Sarin’s eyes widened at the prospect of meeting the dwarves, and even Harlam looked as though he was willing to investigate. “Come,” he

announced, smiling broadly. “There’s little sleep in me this night. Let’s go and explore, and see what we can find.”

Eagerly they arose.

Nate grinned wickedly. “It wouldn’t be the mention of dwarf ale that’s prompted your sudden interest, is it?”

Harlam returned the grin, patting his comrade on the shoulder. “It will help us sleep.”

“And then some,” Sarin added eagerly. The other two men laughed at this.

“Watch where you are putting your feet, you big oaf,” the voice cursed from the darkness.

Nate felt the earth move and leapt back fearfully. With the contrast of light from the campfires and the surrounding darkness, it was very difficult to see. He realised that he must have trodden on someone and, by the sounds of their irate voice, they objected to the rough treatment.

“S...sorry,” he stuttered as Harlam and Sarin collided with his back.

A large figure rose in front of him.

“I didn’t see you there,” Nate continued.

“Well then — what have we here?” the voice continued “You’re not Bhutan by your accent.”

“Certainly not,” growled Harlam. “We’re Allunds and proud of it!”

“Then I must assume that Allunds cannot see in the dark,” continued the voice, although somewhat mollified. “Come, join me by our fire. I’ve never seen an Allund before.” The shape lumbered towards one of the nearby campfires. As he entered the firelight he ordered the reclining figures to make room for guests.

“Look lively and smarten yourselves up,” he ordered. “We’ve company. Garrick, get some wine for our guests.” One of the figures rose and went to collect a jug while the large man sat down by the roaring flames. Harlam and the others joined them, arranging themselves in the spaces amongst the other men.

The introductions were quickly made. Nate and the others couldn’t possibly take in all the names in one go. The large man, the haft commander as it turned out, was called Jorrant. At that moment Garrick returned with a jug of wine which he set down in front of the group before sitting down himself. He was a tall, lanky individual with a thin face and short-cropped hair.

“You will have to watch your purse with Garrick around; he’s as crooked as a nine snath coin. He was told, *either join the army or go to prison for a year*. Unwisely, he chose the army.”

Garrick grinned broadly, revealing several missing teeth and many more blackened stumps.

In the light of the fire they could see Jorrant more clearly. He was a big man and well muscled, with a short crop of dark hair. A deep scar ran diagonally across his forehead, cheek and lips, adding to his fierce countenance.

Nate looked around. All the Bhutans were dressed similarly, wearing bright red cloaks. They had no armour and instead wore metal-studded leather jerkins that looked comfortable and warm. Rather than breeches the Bhutans wore a short skirt, braided with leather thongs, and thick socks which came up to their knees. Each man carried a broadsword and a small axe.

At first the Allunds found the Bhutan accents difficult to follow, and Nate had to ask Jorrant to repeat himself several times when he spoke.

“You were in the battle, were you?” Jorrant asked more slowly, as if the Allunds were simple. The other Bhutans grinned.

Harlam nodded.

“They say there was a dragon,” Jorrant said eagerly. “My men and me laid odds on whether there is such a thing. Did you see it?”

“I saw it,” Sarin interrupted. “I was standing on the inner wall, about fifty yards from the main gate with a demon doing its best to kill us all. As tall as a house, it was, and I was frightened, I can tell you. We’d heard tales of how a demon can take your soul to hell.”

Jorrant snorted derisively but the other Bhutans were listening in awe. Sarin ignored the big man and continued his tale.

“Suddenly there was a loud crack, like the snap of a whip, a giant whip at that. A sudden gust of wind caught us and I thought that another demon had materialised, and then suddenly a dark form streaked by us. It was so close I could have reached out and touched it!”

The Bhutans stared at Sarin with a mixture of fear and wonder. They had heard about the dragon and how it had saved the city, but the tales had been second hand. Even Jorrant was silent, drinking in every word.

Sarin closed his eyes to picture the dragon more clearly, remembering his first impressions. His voice betrayed the awe he had felt. Perhaps if a more seasoned warrior had told the tale, then the listeners would have been sceptical; it was his youth that convinced them.

“It was huge,” he continued, “and its speed! At first I could not think what it was that had flashed by. It was as if my heart had stopped beating and time stood still. Then the dragon was through the gate, rising into the sky on outstretched wings that seemed gossamer thin, like the finest silk, and yet so

strong. It was a red dragon. The neck was long and tapered to its head. The tail was also long, thick at the body and very fine at the tip.”

“When I first saw it,” Sarin continued, looking at each wide-eyed listener in turn, its body was stretched taut as an arrow; I assumed that was for speed. Kaplyn, he is an Allund, and our King, for that matter, sat astride the dragon just where the neck joined the body. He killed the demon with his sword which they say was Eldric made. I saw it and it glowed blue, as bright as the stars.”

“The whole incident lasted for only a few heartbeats,” Sarin said. “And yet I will remember it forever. I saw the dragon, later — high in the sky. It was coiled in mid-flight, its wings folded back as it started to turn for another attack. I remember thinking, *how did a rider stay on such a fearful creature?* Then it was gone from view. Shortly after that, the enemy was in retreat, their will to fight broken.” Sarin’s voice faded until the only sounds were the crackle of the fire and other distant voices in low conversation.

“Is it true that demons can take a man’s soul?” one of the Bhutan soldiers asked.

By Sarin’s side, Jorrant frowned darkly. Soldiers going into battle needed a high morale. “It’ll have to get past me to get you, Callor, so you don’t need to worry,” he interrupted. All turned to look at the haft commander. In the dancing firelight his craggy face looked more krell than human and the long scar made him look fearful.

“If a demon comes near me, it will taste Bhutan steel. Stab them here,” he indicated a point just below his throat, “and it sends them back to hell — pronto.” No one doubted that he could do it, either; many present had seen him fight.

“Watch out,” a Bhutan soldier by Garrick’s side whispered to Nate. “When he is in this mood, he will tell you how he got his scar.”

As if prompted by the words, Jorrant pointed to the scar, “Did I tell you how I got this?”

Nate and the other Allunds shook their heads; Garrick winked at Nate.

“I was on patrol in the Chanteal Mountains,” he turned to Nate confidentially. “You know the routine — we were looking for krell to ease the minds of fat merchants. We’d been out for some time and were climbing a particularly steep mountain with a small stream on our right ...”

“Left,” interrupted Garrick, coughing gently. Jorrant turned on the older soldier, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

“As I said, the river was on the right,” he continued to glare at Garrick who shrugged in resignation.

“A stone suddenly clattered down from above. We froze, instantly alert.”

“Nothing of the sort,” whispered Garrick to Nate. “His horse threw him and he ended up sitting on his rump.”

Jorrant ignored the jibe. “I ordered the troops to dismount, and it was lucky that I did, for just then a hail of arrows landed amongst us. We knew it was krell from that instant; nobody makes arrows as badly as they do.” This was untrue; krell arrows were as deadly as any other.

“We sought shelter as best we could and waited for them to run out of arrows. Within seconds though, an unholy cry went up and hundreds of krell attacked, seeming to come from the very rocks themselves.”

Nate looked at Garrick for confirmation. Garrick nodded grimly; he was tense as though reliving the memory.

“A large krell, wielding a massive axe, strode towards us, and I marked him for myself,” Jorrant stated bluntly. His eyes narrowed to thin slits. “I blocked his first blow but the shock shattered my blade. The axe followed through and I threw myself back, but not before it did this,” he indicated the scar. “Damn nearly took my head off and I was blinded by my own blood. Instinct told me to roll and keep rolling. I heard his axe striking the rocks near me and I feared that I was finished. Garrick came to my aid, but this krell was strong. He simply swept Garrick to one side like a rag doll. The delay was enough though, even if it did cost Garrick his teeth — and his looks.” The others grinned at Garrick who flashed the few remaining teeth back at them in a sheepish grin.

“I picked up a rock, slamming it into the krell’s knee for all I was worth. That brought him up sharp, I can tell you. Broke his knee and felled him like an ox. With these I finished him...,” he held up his hands for all to see, “...broke his neck.”

“The rest, seeing their leader down, gave up and fled. They could have finished us if they had continued their attack,” Garrick said in the hushed silence. “We were easily outnumbered — but, without their leader, they lost the will to fight.”

“I didn’t know that there were krell in Bhutan,” Harlam said in surprise.

“There have been krell in Bhutan ever since the Krell Wars. Nobody knows how many live there, and it was with some reluctance that our people sent an army north at all; while we swan around up here our homes are at risk.”

The Allund soldiers remained silent. Allund had managed to escape the ravages of the krell hordes. Perhaps the Priests of Ryoch had something to do with that but nobody knew for sure, and, now that the priests had turned traitors, perhaps krell were more active in Allund. Nate glanced at Harlam

who returned his troubled look; both had wives and children at home and they had thought them safe.

Approaching hoof-beats stirred the group. Suddenly the Bhutans were on their feet with Jorrant saluting smartly. A rider materialised from the darkness, dressed as the other Bhutans, in a rich red cloak pinned at his throat by a large brooch of obvious wealth. A regal figure looked down on the soldiers and smiled warmly.

“Prince Fiad,” acknowledged Jorrant. “It’s an honour sir.”

“The honour’s mine,” replied Fiad, dismounting. “But what’s this? Are we entertaining Allunds or is it the other way round?”

Nate and the others had also risen to their feet and they looked in awe on the Bhutan prince. None of them had seen Fiad before let alone met him.

Seeing their uncertainty, Fiad bade them sit and then squatted down himself before anyone could object. “Have you been telling them tales of the famous scar Jorrant?” Fiad asked. Jorrant nodded and the prince smiled. “No mean feat from what I heard.”

Jorrant grinned, broadening the famous scar. In the quiet the fire popped sending a flaming ember flying from its ferocious heart. The ember burned brightly as it flew, but away from the heat it swiftly faded.

“Is there any wine?” Fiad asked, flashing a grin. The others looked on blankly and Garrick held up his half empty pitcher. Fiad shook his head and, rising, went to his horse where he unhooked a large flagon.

The others looked at each other nonplussed as the prince went around the group filling their mugs with the rich red liquid.

By morning no one could remember the idle chatter of the previous night, but the prince left them with fire in their hearts. His brief stay gave them confidence and suddenly it felt right to go into the wilderness to face the enemy. They were strong, stronger than any army ever assembled.

When Harlam, Nate and Sarin left the group to return to their camp, their heads had been spinning and not just from the wine. As the sun rose, trumpets blared to greet the dawn. In the light of day, the weary Allunders passed by other small groups in the scarlet robes of Bhutan; then these changed to the silver livery of West Meath. They had travelled farther than they had thought, but had not managed to find the dwarves. Still they had spoken with a prince! Everywhere there was an excited clamour as troops of all nations breakfasted and welcomed the dawn.

Suddenly a fanfare sounded from the high walls and towers of CarCamel, and the partly repaired city gates opened as a host of riders issued forth. At the head rode Queen Catriona and, behind her, came the cavalry and then

infantry. Their orange cloaks seemed suddenly brighter as the sun broke through the mass of clouds. Warm, gentle light bathed the Thracians and a great cheer went up from the assembled throng. For a moment Catriona was bathed in light and everyone felt heartened. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the light failed as dark clouds closed ranks. From the north a chill wind sprang up, forcing the assembled men to pull their cloaks tighter.

Trosgarth was calling.