

KELDAR

GELCIA

URIL C

SHANE SIMON
THE PROPHECY

DORMMOUTH

ORIDIA

EDORAM

Regina River

SIMON & SON

AHMLA

KINGS FORD

KINGS TOWN

ST
HARD

FORT
TOLEM

ZIRCON HILLS

HELDEN

So

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To Mom and Dad
with love

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PROLOGUE

THE GATHERING

Darkness descends upon the desert, quickly, silently, like a hawk striking its prey. The temperature drops; the Nomads seek shelter in the crevices of the mountains. The wind breathes life into the sand and sends whirling dervishes spinning across the massive dunes. Silence engulfs the desert. The fortress, carved into the valley and abandoned for centuries, still stands—a symbol of human triumph against time. Its gates are still open as a monument to those who fought the great battles to save humanity, battles forgotten by many.

In the courtyard of the Great Keep of Charles, they wait as their ancestors waited before them. They have waited since the last man left the sanctuary. In the silence of the desert, they wait patiently for the return. They have been loyal for so many agonizing years. They will finally be rewarded. Now the prophecy will come to pass.

ONE

ORIDIA

Morning blessed the city of Oridia as the first rays of the golden sun struck the river which ran through the metropolis, the Regina, named after the first Queen of Men. The rays danced upon the water, skipping with delight upon it. Oridia, the capital city of men had been founded almost seven thousand years before. What had begun as a village with a few thatched houses had grown to become the pinnacle of human society.

The ruler of the Oridian Empire, the most powerful man in Zalar, had awakened. King William Balimore XII walked onto his bedroom terrace on the fifteenth level of his great citadel, the Citadel of Charles. He gazed out upon his beautiful city. He still had a few moments before his daily Consulate meeting began. The streets had begun to fill and the morning bustle would begin in only a few moments. A cock crowed and disturbed the morning's tranquility. In response, the volume of the city began to escalate.

King William walked back into his quarters. The citadel in which William and his family resided was an incredible feat of architecture. Many believed it to be a palace rather than a stronghold. The citadel itself was thirty floors and several subterranean levels.

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A single gate gave access to the mighty citadel, ensuring an attack could come from only one direction. The same could not be said about retreat. Myths and legends circulated in Oridia about a labyrinth of secret passages under the city. It was rumored that should the city ever come under attack, the royal family could make their escape through these hidden passageways.

The exterior of Charles Citadel had been constructed from white marble and reinforced with solid rock to withstand bombardment. Terraces ran around the entire citadel and the queen and her ladies had planted wonderful and exotic flowers on each. The flora had grown to a gigantic size and gave the citadel a wild appearance.

Oridia was protected by two rings of massive stone walls. Each wall rose fifty feet high and measured twenty feet thick. Stalwart guard towers were scattered along the outer wall every hundred feet. Entrance was given by four double gateways made of solid zircon. Where the river cut through the city, giant water gateways had been designed. Huge zircon bars raised and lowered, allowing ships to pass up and down the mighty Regina.

William knelt and kissed his queen before he left for the Great Hall. The gentle morning sun illuminated her pale complexion. *Mary, my beautiful angel*, William thought. They had been married when William had turned twenty-two, the standard marrying age for an Oridian prince. Mary had been just seventeen and a shy girl from a noble Gelcian family. The couple had given birth to two children, a son, Lionel XIII, then a daughter, Alicia.

Of average height, William was in solid health for a man his age. His brown hair was shoulder-length and straight. With eyes of hazel, the king always seemed to have a soft glow that projected his warm and generous nature.

William left his chambers and proceeded down the long corridor to the lift tower. Huge stained glass windows soaked sunlight into the citadel. With images depicting great Oridian victories and religious

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events, the windows were individual works of art. Soaring high above the citadel was a tower, several hundred feet high. From atop this tower, Oridian kings would confer with the savior of mankind, Oridon, and watch over their empire. From the spire of the mighty tower fluttered the flag of Oridia. The pennant bore a mighty lion, bearing its teeth and swiping its enemies aside.

King William reached the lift tower and stepped onto the platform. The lift was a large wooden platform held up by chains and pulleys. Twenty-five men operated the lift day and night, lowering and raising the king and his staff to the desired floor.

“Good morning, Phillip,” William called to the parapet above him. His voice echoed throughout the colossal stone tower.

“Good day, sire,” a burly man called as he poked his head over the edge. “Just tell us when, my liege.”

The lift began to descend at a steady rate, going past the floors one by one. It reached the second floor, the location of the Great Hall, and William tugged on a chain dangling above him. The lift came to an abrupt stop. William stepped into the dimly lit corridor. The torches were still alive from the previous night. Their dying flames cast dancing shadows upon the far wall, where the tapestries and battle flags of the Oridian kings hung.

A young woman sat upon a bench in the middle of the hall. A book was propped open in her lap and her golden hair was loose and flowed past her shoulders. She looked up from her book to see William approaching her.

“Hello, Father,” she said as she closed her book and stood. A smile spread across her beautiful face.

“Good morning, Alicia,” William said. He moved and embraced his daughter. Alicia gave him a soft kiss on his cheek.

“Have you seen Professor Darelín, Father?” Alicia asked. Her blue eyes were pleasant and bright.

“No, Alicia, I have not. I should think he would be in his study,” William replied.

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“No, I already called there,” Alicia said. “I had wanted to ask him a question about Philosopher Gelgor. I suppose it shall have to wait.” Alicia smiled once more. “I do not want to keep you from your ministers, Father,” Alicia joked.

“I would hope that you had.” William laughed. “I must be off though. The Consulate will begin in moments. If I happen to encounter Professor Darelin, I will inform him that you have a question,” William told his daughter.

“Thank you, Father,” Alicia said as she kissed him once more. She returned to her seat on the bench. Alicia’s fair skin and flowing golden locks caused the young men of Oridia to pine for a glance of her. She was timid by nature and seldom ventured outside the citadel walls, except to confer with a renowned scholar or purchase a book. Her crystalline blue eyes gazed into the souls of those she met.

When Alicia did venture into the city, life paused. All in the street would bow. Not because they had been ordered to, or in admiration of Alicia’s beauty, but to respect her personality. Above all, Alicia was a philanthropist. The homeless and sick sought her out and told her their tales. To some she gave fortunes in gold and to others she gave nothing, for she knew they had lied. Alicia could not be fooled. To the citizens of Oridia, a better princess could not be found.

As King William continued down the corridor, he approached the door of the Great Hall. His footsteps resounded in the corridor, giving the dozing door wards warning of his approach. The door had been a gift received ages ago from the king of the Iscorians, Agalon Geldor. The massive wooden doors had been crafted by skilled Iscorian smiths. Two mighty dragons, one crimson and the other a royal blue, were carved into the doors. Their fiery breath swirled around them as they battled over the world upon which they sat. The magnificent doors were opened by their wards and golden light poured from within them.

From stained glass windows the sun’s morning light flooded into the splendid hall, illuminating all within. The throne of the

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Oridian kings had been crafted long before. It sat upon a raised dais behind a podium where William would deliver his orations. The throne was magnificent. Priceless jewels were inlaid in the framework and the throne itself had been cast in zircon, symbolizing Oridia's great wealth and power. The throne, representing Oridia's far reaching empire, was immense. The back of the throne rose fifteen feet and its seat could hold three men.

The occupants of the hall, including those who sat behind the long tables in their ancient gnarled chairs, rose as their king entered. Those who sat in the chairs were ancient gnarled men themselves. They were the Oridian Consulate and they held the power to overturn the ruling of the king. The oldest member of the Consulate was ninety-seven, while some of the consulmen were not a day past twenty.

These young politicians had inherited their seats from their fathers and were now calling for radical reforms and changes to the Oridian Empire. They were known as the Young Lions and were led by the intrepid Duke Thomas Marlbury.

As King William sat, so too did the rest of the hall. The daily Consulate meeting had begun.

"I should like to know of Baron Anthis's requisition," William addressed his consulmen.

A withered old man rose from his chair. His silver hair lay in wisps on his head. He supported himself with an oak staff and as he spoke, his voice portrayed none of his frail complexion. The voice of a much younger man escaped from the old body and it commanded respect.

"My liege, Baron Anthis's requisition was rejected by the Consulate. The vote was seventy-six to twenty-four."

"Thank you, Headman Orlandu. I should like to know the reason for the rejection of the requisition," William said.

"Sire," a much younger man said as he rose from his chair. He had shoulder length black hair and an athletic physique. "The Baron's requisition was rejected because it would cost more than the initial

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estimate. If you will allow me to continue, my liege, I shall explain more.”

“You may continue, Duke Marlbury,” William consented. The young man grinned with a feverish pleasure.

“Thank you, my liege. In their infinite wisdom, the elder consulmen have decided the cost of four hundred thousand helos was too great a sum to allocate to so small a task as the exploration of the Western Sea.” Marlbury paused and a fire flickered in his brown eyes. “I seem to recall that only last year the Consulate approved the generous sum of three hundred thousand helos for the construction of the royal gardens. I bear no ill will toward the gardens. Without them the palace would be desolate. However, when weighing the two expenditures, only a hundred thousand helos difference, one can see that the possibilities of the Western Sea are endless.”

“Indeed the Western Sea is endless,” Headman Orlandu said as he stood again. His firm voice drew back the attention of those Marlbury had bent to his will. “Duke Marlbury forgets the recent expedition led by Lord Admiral Ferrer of Illoria proved unsuccessful. Not only was the venture a failure, but it nearly bankrupted the Illorian government.”

And you, Headman,” Marlbury retorted. “Seem to forget Illoria’s income is but a quarter of ours.”

“It makes no difference,” Orlandu argued. “Four hundred thousand helos is far too great a sum to be spent on so great an uncertainty as the Western Sea.”

“So great an uncertainty?” Marlbury asked. His eyes flamed with resentment. “Headman Orlandu, I seek not glory for myself, but glory for the mighty Oridian Empire!” Marlbury’s supporters erupted into raucous cheers while the elder consulmen scoffed.

“The Oridian Empire has enough glory for the time,” Orlandu replied.

“We cannot sit idly by while our enemies surpass us in greatness,” Marlbury said.

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“Enemies?” Orlandu repeated. “What enemies does Oridia have—the Ramuluks? Duke Marlbery, surely you do not believe that King Derkoc has the means to construct great sailing vessels under our very noses and launch an expedition to the west.”

“I do not speak of the Ramuluks, Headman. I speak of our ancient enemy,” Marlbery paused. There was a sharp intake of breath from the consulmen. “Ricidad,” Marlbery hissed. The word lingered on the air like a putrid scent. Marlbery’s supporters were stunned by his unexpected statement.

“What you say is treason!” Orlandu yelled. “For three hundred years peace has prevailed between the kingdoms of men. I shall not allow your childish ambitions to plunge Zalar into the darkness that is war.”

“You old fool,” Marlbery said. The fire in his eyes was blazing. “I swear on the grave of my father that I shall have my vengeance upon you for your insult!”

“That will be enough,” William yelled from the throne. “The Consulate will come to order. Duke Marlbery, as long as I sit upon this throne you will not speak ill of Headman Orlandu again. He has served me and my father before me with distinction.”

“I am sorry for my harsh words, my lord. I lost my temper,” Marlbery said.

“It seems you have never had a limit to your temper, Duke. Another outburst will require me to place your seat up for removal,” William told Marlbery.

“Sire,” Marlbery said with a smug grin. “You seem to forget my seat is hereditary. It cannot be filled by anyone else but my kin.”

“And you, Duke Marlbery, seem to forget that I am the King of Oridia and I may do as I wish, so long as it is approved by the Consulate. I believe that your vote in such a situation would make little difference.”

“Yes, my liege. I beg your forgiveness,” Marlbery groveled.

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“Rise, Duke. I will forgive you now, though in the future I shall not be so merciful,” William said.

“Thank you, my liege.” Marlbury slipped back to his seat and sat in silence.

“After hearing the outcome of this vote, I have decided in favor of the majority. The expedition shall be suspended,” William announced.

The elder consulmen clapped while the younger sulked, though none more than Marlbury.

“For the next item of inquiry I ask if our riders have left with the invitations for the Annual Oridian Ball,” William said.

“Yes, sire,” Orlandu replied. “They were dispatched many days ago.”

“And every nation was included?” William asked.

“Yes, sire. Once again, I doubt King Roland will be able to attend due to his failing health. I am certain Baron Matthew Cleary will attend in his stead,” Orlandu told his king.

“How long will Roland linger?” William said.

“He will linger for years, my liege. Minister Ollier rules Illoria now,” Orlandu said.

“Minister Ollier has long oppressed King Roland’s subjects. Now Illoria is bankrupt and buried in its debt. Lend them no more,” William told Orlandu.

“Of course, sire,” Orlandu responded.

“Before this meeting is adjourned is there any pressing information that must be shared?” William asked.

“May I speak, my lord?” A burly man rose from his place at the back of the hall. Ruggedly built, with a trimmed mustache that matched his auburn hair, he was rather tall for an Oridian—close to six-and-a-half feet tall. The lion of Oridia was emblazoned on his tunic and a sword hung at his side.

“The Consulate will recognize Grand Marshall Gordon Longstreck,” William said.

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"I thank the Consulate for allowing me to speak, though I fear I bring ill tidings," Longstreck said. Nervous glances were exchanged among the consulmen. "The most recent convoy to Am-Nok-Kar has not returned. They were due at Ahmlam over a month ago. Not one member has returned." Longstreck paused and allowed an ominous silence to fill the hall. "I suspect the convoy came under attack," Longstreck finished.

"Grand Marshall, King Derkoc's raiders would not dare to pillage so far into our empire," Orlandu said. His voice seemed weary now.

"I realize this just as you do, Headman," Longstreck replied.

"How large of an escort accompanied the convoy, Grand Marshall?" Orlandu asked.

"Two hundred cavalry led by Fifth Marshall Erolt," Longstreck answered.

"Bandits, Grand Marshall, have plagued the southern trade routes since I was a lad," Orlandu said. His voice was regaining its power.

"No bandits could have done this, Headman. No bandit lord could face the full strength of a cavalry contingent," Longstreck said in annoyance.

"Who could have done this, Grand Marshall?" Orlandu asked.

"The Nomads," Longstreck replied.

"Nonsense!" Orlandu shouted. "The Nomads are a peace loving race. They have never been hostile toward our trade."

"A missing convoy cannot go unexplained, Headman. As I said, no bandit lord is powerful or bold enough to tackle cavalry and Derkoc's marauders could not venture so far south without detection. The only remaining aggressors are the Nomads," Longstreck concluded.

"What was the convoy's cargo?" William asked from the throne.

"I have the list here, my lord," Longstreck said. "Four hundred men accompanied the convoy. Two hundred were Erolt's cavalry. The others were either ministers or merchants. The cargo included thirty

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thousand helos of gold, forty of silver, and over nine thousand fions of zircon.”

“Nine thousand fions of zircon?” William repeated. “When did I order zircon to be traded with the Nomads?” William asked as he rose from his throne.

“It was not from the armory, sire. A merchant, Baron Illes Antio, had purchased the zircon directly from the mines. The Nomads had expressed interest in zircon and said they would pay well for it. It appears they received it for nothing,” Longstreck said.

“Lies!” Orlandu cried. “These are the lies of a war-mongering Marshall! These Nomads are not warriors. They are strictly a religious race. The only reason they would show any hostility is for religious transgressions. Foolish Erolt must have ignored or disrespected the Nomad ceremonies. I have spent many years of my life wandering the Endless Desert with the Nomads, learning their language. They do not even have a word for war!”

“This is absurd!” Longstreck yelled. “Zircon has only one use. We use it to forge weapons and armor, the finest weapons and armor. Why else would these savages want zircon? And to demand nine thousand fions, that is a great quantity indeed!”

“Headman!” William called. “Grand Marshall! I shall not allow this bickering to continue. We cannot be certain who is responsible for the apparent attack on this convoy. It is clear that some action must be taken. Does the Consulate have an objection to a military expedition to Am-Nok-Kar?” William asked.

“Sire,” Orlandu protested.

“I have not ordered the destruction of the Nomads, Headman. I have only asked for an investigation. Do you protest that?”

“No, my lord.” Orlandu returned to his seat.

“I shall ask again. Does any member of the Consulate protest a military expedition to Am-Nok-Kar and the surrounding territory to

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investigate the missing convoy?” William asked the entire hall. The consulmen remained silent. “Grand Marshall, what do you believe to be a suitable number of men for this expedition?” William turned to Longstreck.

“I believe two thousand will be sufficient, sire,” Longstreck replied.

“It shall be two thousand. How many of that number shall be mounted?” William asked.

“Five hundred, sire,” Longstreck answered.

“It has been decided. Grand Marshall, I give command of this expedition to you,” William said.

“Sire,” Marlbery interjected as he rose from his seat.

“Yes, Duke?” William asked.

“With all due respect to the Grand Marshall, I believe giving him command of this force would be a declaration of war against the Nomads. As the Headman explained to me not so long ago,” Marlbery looked to Orlandu and grinned, “Zalar has not seen war for over three hundred years. I ask the members of the Consulate, do they wish to see war now?”

The consulmen began to murmur amongst themselves. They knew the words of the young duke were true. Giving command to Longstreck would mean open war against the Nomads.

“Well then, Duke Marlbery, who do you believe should command?” William asked.

“Third Marshall Prince Lionel Balimore,” Marlbery said.

Longstreck broke the silence that followed Marlbery’s statement.

“Duke, the prince is a third marshall in the cavalry. He is not fit for a command of this magnitude.”

“The Consulate may vote differently, Grand Marshall,” Marlbery said.

“Sire.” Longstreck turned to William.

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“I cannot decide this matter,” William said. “The vote must go to the Consulate.”

“Sire, you cannot allow your son to command this expedition,” Longstreck raged.

“It is not my decision, Grand Marshall. The Consulate must now vote on this matter. We shall reconvene in one hour’s time. I will request my son’s presence at this session,” William said. “I declare this session complete. Any other concerns shall be discussed during the next session.”

The members of the Consulate rose from their chairs, still arguing with one another. Marlbury wore a triumphant grin as he walked from the hall. It was wiped clean by Longstreck’s sudden appearance.

“I suppose you believe that was another glorious political maneuver by the Young Lions. Right, Marlbury?” Longstreck asked in anger.

“I am sorry, Grand Marshall. I believe I am only doing what I am required to do as a consul. The Consulate was created so there would be diversity in the power distribution, not a solidification of it,” Marlbury replied.

“I know more than you think, Duke Marlbury.” Longstreck’s words cut through the air between them. “I know of your organization and its missions.”

“Excuse me, Gordon. I have not the slightest idea of what you speak,” Marlbury said.

“You are a liar!” Longstreck’s emotions exploded. People in the corridor turned their heads to see where the eruption of anger had come from. “I have warned the king against you. He knows better than to listen to you,” Longstreck whispered now. “So does Headman Orlandu. You shall never gain the full vote as long as he is Headman.”

“We shall see, Grand Marshall. We shall see. If you will excuse me, I am summoning the prince now.” Marlbury sidestepped his seething confronter and continued down the long corridor.

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Longstreck raged. *For ten years of my life I have served as grand marshall. Now a child will receive command of the first major military expedition in three hundred years. I know what that traitorous dog Marlborny wants. He will not get it as long as I am alive. Orlandu will see to that.*

Longstreck left the dark corridor and was bathed in the sunlight of the palace gardens. He stormed past the intricate flower arrangements, flora that had been imported from throughout the empire. He brushed up against carefully cultivated hedges with no concern.

He remained angry until the gentle mist of a cascading waterfall drifted over him. Longstreck had never cared for beauty. A woman was one thing, but these gardens were another. Too long had he slept on the rough ground of the Oridian Empire. The city of Oridia was situated in the center of the known regions of the continent of Zalar. It stood on a rolling plain of golden wheat fields. Longstreck had patrolled these fields his entire life.

The Oridian Empire had other, smaller cities as well. Longstreck had been to all of them. The port town of Dormouth on the coast of the Western Sea served as Oridia's outlet to the ocean. The fortress towns of Edoram and Ahmlam protected Oridia's eastern empire. Longstreck had grown up in Edoram. Kings Town had been established three hundred years ago, after Oridia's victory in the Ricidian War and Helden, the southernmost of Oridia's cities, was a mining town located near the famous Zircon Hills.

The gardens Longstreck continued to walk through had cost three hundred thousand helos. To satisfy the princess's endless curiosity, the king had ordered gardeners from every corner of the empire to find rare and beautiful plant specimens and bring them for the gardens. So they did, and the palace gardens teemed with exotic and wild plant life. These gardens were beautiful, though to Longstreck no beauty could wash away the countless years of bloodshed he had seen battling bandits and slaying Ramuluk raiders.

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Marlbory was also in the gardens, searching for the prince who would lead his expedition. He navigated through the labyrinth of plants into the garden square and discovered the prince doing what he expected. Prince Lionel was fencing with one of his friends amidst a crowd of young Oridian beauties, the daughters of the socially and financially elite.

With a careless disregard for the safety of the spectators, the prince and his partner jabbed and parried, stumbling into Princess Alicia's precious hedges and trampling on her ornate flower beds.

"Come now, Peter. Is that all?" Lionel asked his partner. Prince Lionel was certainly no longer the boy he had used to be, playing with toy soldiers and bashfully running to his mother whenever a young maiden would talk to him. Now he rode with the Oridian cavalry and held royal banquets, to which he invited the most beautiful young ladies of Oridia.

At twenty years old, Lionel possessed an overwhelming passion for life. Athletic and intelligent, he had handsome features—blue eyes and sandy blonde hair that he wore longer than most young men his age. Throughout the empire, maidens fawned over the dashing young prince and their fathers did nothing but encourage them.

Lionel's craving for danger and excitement led not only to his daily destruction of his sister's gardens due to fencing competitions, but also to reckless stag hunts. Rumors circulated of how Lionel and his hunting party would pursue their quarry hundreds of miles across the empire rather than allow it to escape.

Lionel's recklessness gave Oridians a topic for discussion as they sat around their dinner tables in the evening. Once it had been said that Lionel had ventured into the Ramuluk Kingdom of Uril-Quell, just to see what it was like. The stories were told of how Lionel had been able to slay the Ramuluk king, Derkoc, with his bare hands and escape with magnificent wealth. Though to Lionel's misfortune, Derkoc was seen a week later hunting stag in the Gelcian Mountains.

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Lionel and his partner continued fencing. Lionel's opponent and friend, Peter, began the fight with a new fury, parrying Lionel's blows with ferocity. Marlbury watched the fight with interest, observing Lionel's graceful fighting style. The youth's enthusiasm was incredible. Lionel seemed to tire of the game and began his own assault. With blinding speed he moved forward and with a series of slashes and cuts pinned his opponent against the palace wall. Peter dropped his sword and bowed to the victor. His brown hair was soaked with sweat and his hazel eyes were bright and attentive. Peter and Lionel had been friends since birth. Lionel was just two days older.

"You fought well today, Peter," Lionel told his friend as he helped him back on his feet to the applause of the maidens.

"But you fought better, Lionel."

"It comes with time," Lionel replied.

Marlbury saw his chance was now, lest the prince be carried off by his young ladies. "Your highness," he interjected as though he had just arrived.

"Duke Marlbury, a pleasure as always," Lionel responded, turning to face him.

"Rather sorry to bother you, but your father requests you at his court," Marlbury told the youth. "A fine bit of swordplay there," Marlbury acknowledged Peter.

"Thank you, Duke. Not fine enough I'm afraid."

"We cannot all fight like the prince, can we now?" He chuckled at his own joke.

"My father does not like to be kept waiting, Duke," Lionel said, ending the pleasantries.

"Yes of course. I'm so sorry, your highness." Marlbury began to lead the way back.

"It seems you have had some influence with the members of the Consulate," Marlbury remarked.

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“Is that so?” Lionel asked. “What should make you say that?”

“It seems that you have been pitted against the Grand Marshall for command of a military expedition.”

Lionel’s eyes brightened—just the effect Marlborn had wished for.

“Duke, surely you jest?”

“No, Prince. It is the truth. You are to appear before the Consulate at the next session, and they will make the decision.”

“Tell me, Duke, where is the expedition bound?”

“Am-Nok-Kar, or the Nomad Oasis, as some call it. A trade convoy and two hundred cavalry have disappeared enroute to the oasis. The Consulate suspects they were attacked.”

“By the Nomads? That is absurd,” Lionel remarked.

“There are many suggestions as to who the aggressors could be. Some believe bandits are responsible, yet others blame the Ramuluk Legion, and the Grand Marshall holds the staunch belief that the Nomads had planned an ambush months in advance.”

“The Nomads have never been hostile to us, or anyone for that matter,” Lionel said.

“Headman Orlandu argued that point well, but the Grand Marshall is still unconvinced. Your father has already decided that there is to be an expedition, and none of the consulmen opposed this. Nine thousand fions of zircon is far too great a quantity to simply vanish into the desert.”

“I agree, Duke. Who was in command of the convoy?”

“Fifth Marshall Erolt and his contingent of cavalry accompanied the convoy. There were also some two hundred merchants traveling with them as well.”

“Fifth Marshall Erolt?” Lionel came to an abrupt halt outside the doors of the Great Hall. “That man is a disgrace to the Oridian military. Drinking when he should be drilling, and attending parties when he should be attending parades—how he rose to the rank of Fifth Marshall I shall never know.”

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“Prince Lionel, I hardly need explain to you why the Consulate is considering you to command this expedition. If Longstreck were to be placed in command, three hundred years of peace would be shattered. His command would come as a declaration of war against the Nomads.”

“I understand, Duke. But why not give command to Second Marshall Keller? Who put my name before the Consulate?”

“I did, Prince.”

“You?”

“Do you have an objection to commanding, Prince?”

“No I certainly do not, though I realize that your...” Lionel paused for lack of a better word. “Your politics and Longstreck’s differ greatly. I would not want to deprive the Grand Marshall of his duty to his country.”

“And neither would I, Prince. But I would rather have you or another subordinate command, rather than risk open war. The Oridian Empire has seen peace for three hundred years and I would not want to jeopardize that prosperity.” Marlbury’s eyes were set alight once more.

“I agree with you, Duke, and that is why I will appear before the Consulate,” Lionel concluded.

“I knew you would be so wise, your highness.” Marlbury grinned as he pushed open the huge doors to the Great Hall.

Once more, the din of conversation died. Lionel, with Marlbury and Peter close behind, made his way to the king. They took their places among the rest of the Consulate. William rose and spoke.

“This session of the Oridian Consulate will now begin. Headman, I bid you to read the minutes of the last session.”

Orlandu struggled up from his seat. “Items discussed by the Consulate at the last session included the expedition to the Western Sea, which after debate was overturned. The Consulate also made note that the invitations for the annual ball have been dispatched, and the final

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item that was presented to the Consulate was the military expedition to Am-Nok-Kar, and who shall command it. Certain consulmen expressed their wish for Third Marshall Prince Lionel Balimore to command over Grand Marshall Longstreck.”

“And so we stand here at the crossroads,” William began. “Do we declare war against the Nomads? Is there any proof to any theory here? The Consulate must decide how to respond to this situation. Military action has been agreed upon, but the question of how strong of a force will be dispatched and who will command it still lingers. So, most noble consulmen, you must debate and vote on these matters. Two commanders have been chosen, Grand Marshall Longstreck and Third Marshall Balimore, but only one may command. You must make your decision. Headman, will you please address the assembly now?”

“Thank you, sire. I believe that the first matter at hand is the selection of a qualified commander.” He looked for a moment at Marlbery, and continued. “Duke Marlbery suggested that Third Marshall Balimore command the expedition. His reason for this is quite logical. Grand Marshall Longstreck in command would mean open war. If Prince Balimore were to be placed in command, it would remain an expeditionary force, nothing more, nothing less. As Headman of this Consulate I place my faith in Duke Marlbery’s candidate, Third Marshall Prince Lionel Balimore.”

The hall erupted into debate. Orlandu’s supporters were shocked at his sudden change in politics. Marlbery sat in his chair, a fiendish grin on his face, showing no sign of surprise. William brought the consulmen back into order.

“I hardly need to ask, but Duke Marlbery, would you state your candidate?”

He said the words with clarity and they reverberated throughout the silent hall. “Third Marshall Prince Lionel Balimore.”

“As I thought. I now would ask the two candidates for command to come forth.” A stunned Lionel rose from his chair. He walked and

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turned to face the Consulate. He was joined by a furious Longstreck, who gave the youth a look of utter contempt. "Grand Marshall, I will ask you to present to the Consulate your statements," William told Longstreck.

"Members of the Consulate, what change has come over you?" Longstreck began his tirade. "Long have you served your king, but seldom has your wisdom failed you. Why now, when faced with the concept of war do you deny it? Because of three hundred years of peace that you do not wish to shatter? Come to your wits! This empire has never been at peace. We have warred with the Ramuluk Legion since the beginning of time. Oridon was slain by their arrows! By peace you mean only peace between the humans. The Nomads are both human, and inhuman." Longstreck spoke in an urgent tone. His voice commanded the attention of the Consulate, all save for Marlbery.

"By warring with them we risk nothing," Longstreck continued. "Long have I studied the way of war. Long have I slept on the hard ground of this empire and made the greatest sacrifices to protect you and yours, and now you ignore me? Is this how I should be treated? I leave you with this consulmen, if indeed the Nomads are responsible, they have organized themselves and are now ready for the brunt of any force that will go against them. I do not doubt Prince Balimore's capabilities, but I can assure you that in experience I have him beaten," Longstreck concluded.

"So, members of the Consulate, do not let the words of this serpent Marlbery influence your vote. Stay true and be independent. Do not succumb to his will." He sat and sighed as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

William rose and addressed the Consulate once more. "You have heard the Grand Marshall. Now you will listen to Third Marshall Balimore." William sat as Lionel stood and began to speak.

The youth did not have the commanding tone that his superior possessed, but there was still a twinge of authority in his voice. To those listening, it seemed that Lionel's voice was the only sound in the hall.

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“Oridians,” he cried. “We have been done an injustice by the Nomads. Our convoy has seemingly been attacked during its peaceful commerce. What have we done to the Nomads? We have traded peacefully with them for centuries, and bettered their civilization.” Shouts of agreement roared from the Consulate.

“Now they betray us. This act cannot go unpunished. Justice must be delivered, and delivered soon. I hold no grudge against the Grand Marshall or his abilities, nor will I ever. He is in command of this army and I respect his abilities, though I too know that his appointment would mean open war with the Nomads. I do not seek to eradicate their kind from Zalar; I seek only to punish them for their injustices. So consulmen, if you wish to wipe the Nomads and their kind from this world forever, than I bid you to choose the Grand Marshall and get it done with. Though if you wish to discern the true cause of this injustice, then I will do that and after I have completed my objective, I will return command to Grand Marshall Longstreck.”

As the last words drifted off Lionel’s tongue, Marlborn’s eyes sprang open.

“Well spoken, my Prince. Surely now the Consulate can see that the Third Marshall is competent to command this expedition. We must vote now, before too much time is lost, and start the expedition on its way.”

“Consulate, you have heard the candidates, and you have heard the thoughts of your headman and, of course, Duke Marlborn. I give you four hours’ time to vote. You are dismissed until the next session.” William ended the day’s second session of the Consulate.

Lionel was the last to rise and he rose from his chair with a dazed expression.

“You spoke well.” William placed his hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Father, though I do not quite remember what it was I said. It all seemed to happen so quickly—everything was blurred. I

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remember standing to speak and cannot recall any of what I said, only Duke Marlbery urging the Consulate to vote.”

“You said what everyone here thought. They will have a difficult time placing their vote. Gordon also spoke well, and all ties aside, I am still undecided.”

“The headman ...” Lionel trailed off.

“Yes, he pledged you his support. If you ask me for a reason, I could not tell you. Orlandu works in strange ways though his choice of you came as a complete surprise to me.”

“Father.” Lionel looked at William. His incisive glare startled his father. “I am ready to command.”

“I know, Lionel, I know. We have a few hours, perhaps more, while the Consulate bickers over the vote. Go and prepare yourself for their decision—for if you are to command, your own regiment will accompany you. If Longstreck is placed in command, I fear he will think you Marlbery’s puppet and send you with your regiment to patrol the border provinces.”

“Marlbery’s puppet?” Lionel asked.

“Gordon is doubtful of those whom Marlbery supports. I trust you know the history between the Marlberys and the Longstrecks?”

“Yes, Father, I’ve not forgotten what Professor Darelin has taught me.”

“Then put it to good use.”

“I will, Father.” Lionel wrapped his father in a warm embrace and William returned it equally.

Lionel left his father to the ministers and exited the Great Hall. He navigated through the labyrinth of corridors and made his way to the library of Oridia. A huge and cavernous hall in the citadel, the library housed centuries of information that had been guarded and passed down from one king to the next. He entered the library, his footsteps echoing throughout the hall, and the scholars looked up for a brief instant to see who had disturbed their tranquility.

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Lionel approached one of the small tables. A woman sat there with a book propped open and several more beside her. A silver tiara ringed her head and beneath it brown hair flowed down her back like a waterfall. She had a fair complexion, with enchanting green eyes that pierced the souls of those she met. Her slender figure was uncommon for a woman of her age, and her soft voice soothed Lionel's troubled mind when she spoke. "And what brings you to the library, Lionel?"

Lionel sat next to her on the knotty oak bench. "Surely you jest, Mother. I frequent the library more often than you know." He smiled with the boyish charm that he knew his mother loved.

"That is not what Professor Darelin tells me." She scolded him with her eyes.

"I cannot deceive you, Mother."

"I thought you had given up trying to." They chuckled, causing the scholars to lift their heads once more.

"I have come to tell you some incredible news, Mother. I trust you know of the missing convoy?"

"I do. The Am-Nok-Kar caravan, was it?"

"The very same. Since it is overdue, the Consulate has decided to launch a military expedition to determine its fate. I have been nominated as one of the potential candidates to lead the excursion."

"And what of Grand Marshall Longstreck? Did the Consulate not select him?" The maternal tone had left Queen Mary's voice, replaced by a more urgent one.

"You know just as well as I that if he leads the expedition it would mean declaring open war against the Nomads. The Consulate is unwilling to shatter the peace because of a missing convoy."

"Who has placed the blame on the Nomads?" Mary demanded.

"No one, Mother. No one has yet. The purpose of the expedition is to question the Nomads as to the disappearance."

"You are so young to be undertaking so great a task by yourself, yet you are so young for many things."

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“Mother, I am twenty years old and quite capable of leading troops into combat and—”

Mary cut him off. “And what of next year, when your father asks you to replace him as king?” she asked.

Lionel paused and thought. “Father has many more years to rule. Why should he give me the throne next year?”

“It is the customary age, twenty-one, for a prince to assume the throne. You of all people should know this. Has Professor Darelin been this absentminded in his teachings, or is it purely your negligence? Your father assumed the throne at fifteen, when your grandfather passed. He has already ruled for more than his time and he grows tired of it. He longs to see the empire once more. He speaks to me often of his urges to go back to the forests of Gelad and to walk amongst the Trees of Eternity. Your father will offer you the crown next year, and when he does, you cannot refuse.”

“Mother, I am ready to be king.” The words hung in the air. The quibbling pens of scholars could no longer be heard.

“I know this, but your father does not. He does not think you are old enough, yet he yearns to grant you his crown. You must prove to him you are ready.”

“This will be my chance. I shall not fail him, Mother. I will make Father and Oridia proud.”

“You need not tell me this, son. I know you will succeed, though I beg you to use your best discretion. Do not provoke a conflict. Settle the matter peacefully.”

“I do not clamor for war like the Grand Marshall, Mother. I must be going now. The Consulate will be reconvening, and I must be there to hear their judgment. I thank you for your advice.” He rose and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek as the quills of the scholars began scratching once more.

“You have your mother’s love,” she told him.

“And you your son’s,” Lionel replied as he walked through the library doors.