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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

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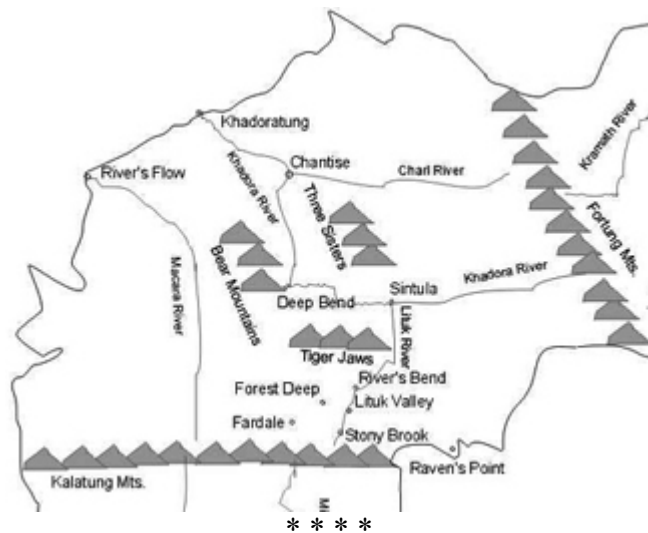
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Map of Khadora

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Forgotten Legacy Series Prologue

Ages ago...

Khador stood in the clearing of the mountain pass and watched the small army approach out of the west. He signaled to his own men to aid and direct the arriving bodyguards, although Omung's followers did not appear to be weary or in need of assistance. The leader of the arriving army walked over to Khador and hugged him in a familiar embrace.

"Greetings, brother!" exclaimed Omung. "I see you are the first to arrive. I trust Fakar will be along shortly."

"It is the appointed day," stated Khador, breaking the embrace.

"Where is father?" Omung queried. "I thought he was to be with your army."

"I had little need for him or his men," grinned Khador. "The people in my sector were no match for my men. Father elected to aid Fakar. He should be here shortly. What of your efforts? Your men appear to be free from battle weariness."

"Battle?" laughed Omung. "There was no battle, only slaughter. The peasants have neither weapons nor any desire to fight. My armies control the entire coastline. They start the sweep towards the center now. The hard part is chasing them through the mountains to make sure we get them all."

"But get them all we must," frowned Khador. "I too am having troubles tracking down the savages in my area. My armies also control both coasts of my sector and push towards the center. We cannot let a single soul escape."

"Yet you fought with father over his plan to kill everyone," Omung pointed out.

"True enough," nodded Khador. "I do not relish senseless slaughter, but father is right. What chased us from our homeland, may we never say its name, must never be allowed here. If we must kill all to keep it from these shores, then so be it. That does not mean I must enjoy the task."

The makeshift camp erupted in murmurs and the two brothers turned towards the commotions. A dozen armed but ragged men were making their way into the pass from the east. Khador peered into the new arrivals and barked harsh orders to his men.

"I see Fakar, but not father," Khador hissed.

Omung merely nodded as the third brother trod over to join his siblings.

Khador received the traditional embrace of Fakar and felt the weakness in his brother's body. He returned the hug firmly and released Fakar.

"Where is father?" Khador asked.

"Dead," Fakar replied, his eyes cast down upon the dirt at their feet. "We followed the plan as instructed. We burned our ships and began the attack. It appeared easy at first as the savages were not used to warfare, but as we entered the hills, things went poorly."

"Poorly?" inquired Omung. "Our scouts reported no armies of any kind. What trouble beset you?"

"Not armies," Fakar reported as he slumped down with his back to the cliff wall. "Their horses are much faster than ours. The savages would gather in packs and poke our flanks and then outrun us as we tried to catch them. Our formations broke and were scattered. They lured our army into the jungle and that is where it happened."

"Where what happened?" demanded Khador. "What happened to father?"

"The jungle was full of giant spiders," twitched Fakar. "Spiders much larger than horses. The spiders were intelligent and attacked us from all sides. Father tried to rally the men out of the jungle. He died killing one of the huge beasts, but by doing so he allowed us to escape."

"Escape!," howled Omung. "Your men fled the battlefield?"

"Where is your army now?" questioned Khador.

Fakar clenched his teeth and nodded towards the small knot of weary men that had accompanied him. "That is what I could find of my army and father's army," he spat.

"Out of tens of thousands, you bring back twelve?" gasped Omung.

"The rest are probably scattered all over my sector," sighed Fakar. "I will gather them when I return there. I dared not miss this meeting. Your help may be required in conquering the east."

Khador paced away from the meeting as Omung continued howling at the youngest brother. The loss of the two huge armies was serious, but not terminal. Still, the savages in all three sectors had to be exterminated, lest the evil follow them to these shores. Khador nodded to himself and strode determinedly back to his brothers.

"The three of us are the only ones left who have yet to receive the magic of forgetfulness," Khador stated. "We shall receive those rites tonight. Tomorrow we gather all of our armies and march on the eastern sector. I want that land destroyed completely. Salt the fields and kill every living thing we find."

Let our mages ensure that it becomes a wasteland forever more."

"What of the savages we both still chase?" asked Omung. "We cannot afford to have any survivors to stain the bloodline. One intermarriage and we have failed. You know what the mages have stated. One stray thought could bring the horror to our doorstep and nothing will save us then. Nothing!"

"The savages in our two sectors are nothing compared to what father has faced," declared Khador. "We will return to hunt our savages after we are done in Fakar's sector."

"Will breeding really cause the memories to resurface?" puzzled Fakar.

"I do not know," conceded Khador, "but I will not chance it. We cannot face the likes of what we fled in our ships. We are fortunate to be alive today to talk of it and after the rites tonight, none will ever talk of it again. Even a mention of its name is enough to draw it here."

"We cannot survive another encounter with it," agreed Omung. "We shall destroy the land of Fakar and return to our own battles after."

Chapter 1

Khadora

The lumbermen shuffled uneasily into a small clearing in the Sitari Valley and laid their packs on the ground. Warily, they glanced around at the dense stand of fargi trees and the soldiers moving through them. Some of the closer trunks showed the scars of past attempts at felling them. Most of the lumbermen had heard the tale of the last time Lord Lashendo had sent men to clear this valley and the soldiers surrounding the workers offered little comfort. Only one man had survived the attack of the Chula and he lived only long enough to tell the tale of the slaughter which had occurred here. The soldiers sent to guard the lumbermen didn't appear to be any less wary as they spread outward in a circle, brandishing their unsheathed swords, searching for any sign of the dreaded cat people.

Togi was one of the replacement workers sent to Lord Lashendo by Lord Ridak, Lord of the Situ Clan, and the tale of the last massacre was told to the new recruits the day they arrived at the remote estate. Togi had never seen a Chula before, but even in Lord Ridak's service, tales of the strange and ferocious cat people were told in the barracks at night. Belief in the horrid tales was not optional in Khadora, for to tell a lie was to give your life to another in payment for the mistruth. No sane person in Khadora ever lied.

The Squad Leader of the soldiers approached the lumbermen while looking off into the woods for signals from his men.

"All right," the Squad Leader bellowed. "Let's get these trees felled and get back to the barracks before nightfall. Move, before I have to call my soldiers back to deal with you instead of the Chula."

Togi picked up his ax and headed into the forest for an available tree. As hard as it would be to chop through the tough bark of the fargi trees, Togi was thankful that he was not one of the slaves who would have to cart the huge trees away. Those slaves would be worked to the point of exhaustion and, most likely, beyond it. The slaves who didn't succumb to fatigue were often crushed while handling the logs.

Togi swung his ax in a gentle practice swing. Around him he could hear dozens of axes impacting on

wood as the other lumbermen began the arduous task of clearing the valley. Togi's ax rebounded off the fargi's hard bark and he braced himself, legs apart, to deliver a powerful stroke to the tree. The ax blade was slicing deep into the bark when a far off scream suddenly rent the air. Togi jerked his ax out of the fargi and gazed around. The other lumbermen looked startled and had also halted their swings. The Squad Leader began pulling his sword from its sheath as if contemplating punishment for the work stoppage when a soldier ran out of the forest, his long braids flying behind him and his scimitar clasped tightly in his fist. The soldier talked briefly in hushed tones with the Squad Leader, who immediately hurried off in the direction of that first scream. Togi watched as the nervous soldier visibly calmed himself, smoothing his tunic, before issuing orders for the workers to move into the center of the clearing.

Screams started coming from every direction and were accompanied by clashes of metal upon metal. Togi dropped his ax and slid covertly into a pile of leaves as his fellow workers returned to the clearing.

The tale of the last massacre indicated that the Chula would kill everybody they found, not just the soldiers, and Togi wasn't ready to die just yet. He quickly decided that he would rather risk the wrath of the Situ soldiers for disobeying an order than die at the hands of the cat people.

Togi lay completely covered with leaves and breathed shallowly. Even under the leaves the screams and growls sounded closer than before. The lumberman tried placing his hands over his ears to shut out the horrible sounds of men dying, but it did no good. A grunt, followed by a scream, preceded the impact Togi felt when a body fell on top of him. His breathing became ragged and he felt small particles of decaying leaves being sucked into his mouth, but the body above him stopped thrashing and lay still.

The body on top of Togi helped to diminish the sounds of battle and death, but the blood dripping down his neck reminded him of the need to remain hidden. Togi's body started shaking and he fought to control his fear. He forced his mind to think of other things, pleasant things. Soon Togi was lost in the days of his youth, and the sounds of his playmates swinging on tree branches into the creek replaced the howls of death around him.

Togi was not sure how long he had been dreaming of more pleasant times when he felt the weight of the dead body being lifted off of him. His mind snapped back to the present and he actually strained his ears to pick out the sounds around him. There was a lot of rustling of leaves and animal growls, but very little talking. The small snatches of conversation, which he did hear, were not the voices of his fellow Situ workers, they were the voices of Chula.

Togi started shaking again and tried to force his mind back to the creek of his youth, but he could not ignore the animal growls around him. Suddenly, strong hands grabbed his legs and dragged Togi out of the pile of leaves. Togi opened his eyes and stared into the gaping jaws of a tiger, a tiger with a man astride it. The man issued some guttural tones and the two Chula who had dragged him out of the leaves grabbed his arms and dragged him towards the clearing. Togi's eyes remained fixed on the Chula riding the tiger. The man's skin was darker than Togi's and his face and chest were painted with strange symbols. The Chula wore nothing but a breechcloth and he rode the tiger as Togi would ride a horse.

Soon the tiger and its rider were lost to his sight and Togi was thrown to the ground in the clearing. Togi looked to his side and promptly vomited. The clearing was filled with body parts as if the lumbermen were sliced by a thousand sickles. Togi retched until he could retch no more. His head spun with fear and revulsion as men grabbed him and hoisted him up to his feet and tied him to a tree. With his back to the tree, the whole clearing became visible to Togi and he tried to clamp his eyes closed, but his fear and the sounds of Chula and tigers passing close to him kept them wide open.

Togi watched as Chula came into the clearing, dragging corpses of Situ soldiers and piling them onto the largest wagon. Several of the Chula rode tigers and all of them were wearing paint on their bodies. A few

Chula were cutting the clothes off of some of the soldiers with their knives and tying the pieces together to form a long rope. Most of the Chula carried spears and a few had swords, but every one of them had a small quiver at his waist and a knife hanging from a thong attached to his breechcloth.

A Chula with a headdress resembling a lion's mane and wearing a long, brown tunic strode into the clearing and approached a Chula riding a black panther. The rider stood out from the other Chula warriors because he was clothed from head to foot in animal skins. Togi watched as the two different-looking Chula conversed and looked towards him. After a few moments of conversation the pair strode over to Togi and stood before him. Togi's eyes blinked as he looked at the face of the Chula with the lion's mane headdress, only it wasn't a headdress at all. The Chula before him sported slit eyes and whiskers like a cat and the mane appeared to be part of him. His split lips smiled as he observed Togi's expression, but it was the Chula in animal skins that spoke.

"I am Tmundo, leader of the Kywara," the Chula stated. "You Khadorans learn slowly. Twice now, my people have had to teach you the lesson of observing our holy grounds. I have little patience for slow learners. You shall live to deliver a message to the Khadorans who would invade our lands. Listen carefully, so that I do not have to carve the message into your flesh with my knife."

Togi nodded briskly as the sweat poured off his brow.

"The next time Khadorans invade this valley," Tmundo declared, "not only the blood of the invaders will be spilled, but the blood of the man who sent them will be spread across his own lands. The Sitari Valley belongs to the Kywara as it has always and how it shall always be. Repeat the message, now."

Togi quivered as he repeated the message word for word. Tmundo swiftly drew his knife and Togi cringed as it flicked towards him. Waiting for the bite of the blade upon his flesh, Togi felt the restraining ropes fall from his body.

"We have prepared a wagon for your journey back home," purred the Chula with the lion's mane. "Even in death, we do not welcome Khadorans on our land. Take them back to your people."

Togi glanced at the wagon piled high with dead Situ restrained by the rope made from the soldiers' clothes. The wagon was designed to haul long logs and was the largest he had ever seen, yet the bodies piled on it would tumble over the sides without the rope holding them on. Eight horses were hitched to the wagon and Togi wondered whether they would be able to pull the weight.

Tmundo gave Togi a shove towards the wagon and the lumberman quickly made his way to the driver's seat and urged the horses forward. Visibly shaking, Togi sighed as the eight large horses started to pull the wagon towards home. The Chula stood and watched the wagon as it slowly picked up momentum.

* * * *

Marak sat in the shade with his back placed against a lituk tree. He eased his sword and sheath over his head and placed it on the ground beside him. Next he removed his metal helmet and subconsciously adjusted his embroidered green and yellow headband. His gaze swept over the orchard and the workers who were harvesting the small, yellow lituks. These fruits were one of the mainstay products of the Situ Clan. Slave workers carried straw baskets and ladders and glumly picked the bitter fruits from their thorny branches. The orchard was quiet as the slaves went about their work wordlessly. Adjacent to the mature orchard was a barren field set to be cultivated this year. Out in the center of the barren field, Marak's gaze halted on the frail figure of a woman kneeling in the dirt and waving her arms. The woman was covered in dirt, obscuring the only colorful portion of her outfit, the broad, embroidered Clan Belt in the green and yellow colors of the Situ Clan. The rest of her attire was simply a dirty, brown tunic that

signified the woman's low status as a slave of Lord Ridak, Lord of the Situ Clan.

The woman bowed her head to the ground and Marak could almost recite the words that were coming from her mouth. The slave was a soil mage and it was her job to prepare the soil for planting of the new orchard. Marak knew the spells by heart, but no one was aware of that fact. All four types of mages in Khadora were looked down upon as simple laborers. Soil mages tended the dirt when necessary for planting or to constrain erosion. Water mages ensured the proper amount of rainfall needed to nourish the crops, while air mages prevented damaging windstorms or dust storms. Sun mages ensured the appropriate sunlight to aid the crops towards a healthy harvest.

Magic in Khadora was simple and menial and many of the mages were slaves, like the dirty, frail woman in the barren field. Marak's eyes welled with wetness as he watched the woman toil over the soil under the thankless watch of her overseer. The slaves in Khadora were not treated much better than the soil the woman worked over and Marak's heart wept every time he sat and watched his mother work. Marak spent many days in the fields with his mother when he was younger and it was at her insistence that he hid the magical talent he possessed.

Marak dabbed at his eyes as he remembered his youth spent in the filthy, cramped slave quarters with his mother. The slave quarters consisted of run-down shacks unfit for habitation of even six people, but Lord Ridak filled each of the shacks with twenty slaves and refused to supply even the materials necessary to maintain the dilapidated structures. The fortunate slaves in shacks containing water mages were spared the discomfort of leaky roofs, but the others often slept on mud-soaked blankets. It was during his youth in the shacks that Marak discovered he had magical talent which, according to common belief, was only held by women. Not only did he have the capabilities of his mother, a soil mage, but he also was capable of performing the other three types of magic, as well. The slave women who tutored him as a child never knew he was capable of any magic other than what she, herself, taught him. They were surprised enough at a boy's ability to learn any magic and each of them promised to keep the secret. Only Glenda, Marak's mother, knew he possessed the skills of the four types of magic.

Once Marak had become of age, he was sent to the Army to help defend the clan. Slaves were not allowed to enter the Army, but Marak was not a slave, his mother was. His mother had become a slave by telling a lie to Lord Ridak, the most serious of offenses in Khadora. Anyone caught telling a lie in Khadora became the property of the person the lie was told to. If a lie was told publicly, anyone who heard the lie could claim the offender as his property. The offender could be taken for a slave or legally killed on the spot. In fact, a slave could be killed by his owner at any time with no legal repercussions. A slave was nothing more than a tool, to be used or discarded at the master's pleasure.

As a child of a slave, Marak was treated as a slave until he came of age. At that time he was treated like any other laborer of the clan. Marak chose to try out for the Army because the living conditions were better than any other occupation, other than being in the Lord's household. While the relative comfort of the barracks was a desirable goal in Khadora, Marak often punished himself for living so much better than his mother. As a soldier in Lord Ridak's Army, Marak was not permitted to converse with slaves unless he was following orders; so, sitting in the orchard and watching his mother from afar was as close as Marak could get. He came and watched whenever he could steal the time from his duties and each time his heart wept with the unfairness of life in Khadora. Approaching footsteps alerted Marak before the other soldier spoke to him.

"I thought I would find you here, Marak," greeted Tagoro as he eased his tall, lanky frame to the ground beside Marak. "You should not torture yourself so. In a few years when you get promoted to the rank of Cortain, you will be able to speak with her freely."

Marak tossed his blond braid over his shoulder and turned to look at his friend. "It took me four years to make Squad Leader," stated Marak. "It should take me another four to make Cortain, if I prove to be exceptional, and I have only been Squad Leader for two."

"So, that is only two years away," cheered Tagoro. "Most men never even make Squad Leader. You have proven yourself in battle and the talk around the barracks is that Lord Marshal Grefon is impressed with your squad's efficiency."

"The men of my squad perform well because I treat them well," remarked Marak. "The praise belongs to them, not me. Look at her. Do you think she will last another two years waiting for me to get a promotion? I must find a way to help her."

Tagoro smoothed his black hair away from his yellow and green headband and turned to look at Glenda. He frowned at the sight of Marak's mother kneeling in the dirt. She was so covered with soil that it was hard to tell her hair was blond or her skin was fair. She was the same color as the ground from head to toe. Shaking his head he turned back to Marak.

"Marak," he admonished, "if you disobey the rules, you will end up alongside her. To disobey your orders is the same as a lie. Will it help her any to have her son a slave as well as herself? We have all sworn the Vow of Service to Lord Ridak and he will not overlook any infraction of it."

"Perhaps so," Marak smiled as if enjoying a private joke, "but there are other ways of accomplishing one's goal. If I were ordered to check on the slaves, I would have the chance I seek."

"Cortain Koors knows you seek the opportunity," scolded Tagoro. "He would never issue you such an order and he would intercept any such order coming down from higher up. He is not happy to have the son of a slave as one of his Squad Leaders."

"Koors is a beady-eyed pig," scowled Marak. "He treats his men like animals and wonders why they don't respect him. I do not know how he ever made Cortain."

"He made Cortain because he has served for over twenty years," reminded Tagoro.

"That is twenty years too long," declared Marak. "The man is not fit to lead other men. Koors has let it be known that he expects to be made Lectain this year. I would not know whether to laugh or cry if the Lord Marshal actually gave it to him."

"Lord Marshal Grefon is not a fool," cautioned Tagoro. "Koors has gone as high as he will ever go."

Across the barren field, the overseer pushed Glenda into the dirt with his foot and started shouting. Marak grabbed his sword and leaped to his feet. Tagoro twisted around quickly and saw what had prompted Marak's rise and immediately wrapped his arms around Marak's legs, bringing him to the ground.

"Do not play the fool," cautioned Tagoro. "It is well known that you come here to watch her and Koors may have precipitated the overseer's actions."

Marak eased slightly as he watched his mother get back up and return to work. The overseer was watching the orchard for a reaction instead of Glenda and Marak realized that Tagoro was probably right. Pushing himself from the ground, Marak rose and calmly positioned his sheath and placed his helmet under his arm.

"Let's go back to the barracks before I get her killed," snarled Marak. "Cortain Koors is not the only officer who feels that way about me. In fact, most of them resent a slave's boy being allowed into the Army. It is okay to kill and die for them, as long as you do both quickly."

Squad Leader Tagoro rose and followed Marak towards the barracks. The barracks were solidly built, stone buildings. Each one was rectangular in shape and housed two squads of soldiers and their Squad Leaders. Large holes were cut into the sides to allow light and cool breezes in. When not in use these windows were shuttered with wood panels, which were gaily painted with the symbol of the lituk tree and the clan colors. The soldiers slept in wooden bunks that lined the walls four high. Each bunk had a small shelf at the head and a wooden chest at the foot for personal belongings and in the higher bunks there was even a measure of privacy. The center of the barracks was communal and had long tables for meals.

At the end opposite the entrance were the Squad Leader's quarters. Each Squad Leader had a small room and an additional room was set aside as a communal room for eating and meetings. In some of the barracks, the officers' communal room became the home to a Cortain. Fortunately for Marak, Cortain Koors chose to live in one of the other barracks, so the room became a place where Tagoro and he played Pimic, a game of war strategy which utilized small wooden pieces and a cloth that could be arranged to represent different types of terrain.

Shouting and hollering greeted the two Squad Leaders as they opened the door to the barracks. A cloud of bocco smoke drifted out the door and Marak inhaled the scent deeply. Bocco was fairly expensive in the Situ region, so most of the men only smoked occasionally and only when they were off duty. All heads turned towards the door as they entered and the shouting stopped. As soon as the door closed the clamor resumed and most of the men smiled or waved at the Squad Leaders. Tagoro was the only other Squad Leader who adopted Marak's fashion of dealing with his men. In other barracks, the men would have quietly resumed talking and avoided the gaze of their Squad Leader, but the men in this barrack were allowed to behave as they wished inside the building. They were also willing to die for their Squad Leader.

Marak treated his men with respect and they returned that respect many times over. He also did not believe in ending a soldier's training when the man was certified as having gained the necessary level of competence. Marak always chose the man best at a particular skill to continue training the rest of his squad and his men were eager to continue learning. Marak was also open to styles and techniques that were unconventional and scoffed at by the rest of the Army. As a result, Tagoro and Marak usually led their men away from the compound for training, further isolating the two squads from the rest of the troops. The only officer who seemed inclined to appreciate this was Lord Marshal Grefon, the highest officer in the Situ Army. Because of the successes these two squads had obtained, the Lord Marshal had been using them to guard caravans which carried expensive shipments. The caravans usually went to the nearest city, but on occasion they went as far as the capital city and these trips presented more opportunities to learn different styles of fighting and obtain unconventional weapons.

Merchants in the large cities often told tales of far away places and strange battles which most experienced fighting men laughed at. Marak, instead, listened intently, trying to pick out the fact from fiction. Some of these merchants even carried samples of the foreign weapons and Marak squandered his pay on obtaining samples of these weapons. Some turned out to be useless or worthless for the type of fighting in Khadora, but others, like the Omunga Star, turned out to be deadly weapons when used by an experienced hand.

Marak and Tagoro marched through the barrack and into their communal room. Each grabbed a chair and Marak quickly peeled off his clan wristbands and removed his boots. He untied his green scarf and opened the tie strings of his shirt. He chuckled as he peered at Tagoro and his friend threw him a

questioning glance.

"What's so funny?" Tagoro asked.

"You," laughed Marak. "Actually, both of us. After six years in this Army, I still find these uniforms more a costume than a uniform. Light yellow pants and shirts with green boots and scarves. I hope if we ever have to fight in the forest, it will be in Autumn. The wide embroidered belt and headbands are okay, but I would love to toss the wristbands away forever. I can't stand the way they pull at my shirt when I overextend my thrust. I wonder who designed these uniforms, anyway?"

"The uniforms are the same throughout the country," remarked Tagoro. "Only the clan colors and clan symbol are different. Why can't you ever accept things the way they are?"

"Maybe," speculated Marak, "Khadorans accept too much, just because that is the way things have always been. I don't like uniforms which hinder my movements and I certainly don't like wearing one that makes me feel like I glow in the dark."

"Battles are never fought in the dark," laughed Tagoro, "and if your enemy is close enough to see the lituk tree on your belt or headband, he should be dead already. You worry about the strangest things. Let's have a game of Pimic. Maybe today will be the day I whip your yellow pants off you."

"Not today," Marak said, shaking his head. "I need to find a way to talk with my mother. I can not continue seeing her treated the way she is. It is not right and I will not stand for it any longer."

"That line of thinking will only bring you and her more hardships," worried Tagoro. "How is it that your mother is a slave? You have never talked about it and if you are going to die soon because of your foolish notions, I would like to know."

"I don't plan on dying any time soon," declared Marak. Pulling his headband off, Marak looked quizzically at his friend. "It is not really a secret," he commented. "I just don't like dwelling on it. Lord Ridak caught my mother in a lie and forced her into slavery."

"But why would your mother ever lie?" questioned Tagoro.

"She lied to save my father's life," stated Marak. "She lived on one of Lord Ridak's smaller estates. She did not have the estate Lord's permission to marry when she bore me, but the Lord did not press the matter. My father was not from the estate and used to visit every week or so. Everyone on the estate knew it, but nobody said anything. Under Lord Ridak's law, my father could be killed because the marriage was not sanctioned, but my mother's service was good and the Lord was a kindly man, so nothing was said."

"Something must have been said or she would not be a slave," prompted Tagoro.

"When I was six," Marak sighed, "Lord Ridak paid an unannounced visit to the estate. During his tour he noticed my mother and I and took an interest in her. He inquired where her husband was and she panicked. Lord Ridak had a reputation for invoking cruel justice even where it accomplished nothing, so she told him my father had died. Unfortunately, his interest was more than just passing and he posed the same question to the estate Lord, who told the truth. Lord Ridak immediately claimed her as a slave."

"Did he kill your father, too?" asked Tagoro.

"No," answered Marak. "He waited for the next scheduled visit of my father, but my father must have been warned off because he did not show. Instead, Lord Ridak had the estate Lord executed for not enforcing his law and returned here with my mother and me."

The room lapsed into silence and eventually Marak rose and went to his own room.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

Meeting

Squad Leader Tagoro left the orchard where he thought he might find Squad Leader Marak and headed for the practice site that both squads used. Tagoro was excited with the news he had overheard and couldn't wait to find his friend. He ran down the path towards the small bridge that crossed the Lituk Creek and hurried to the other side. It was a typical early spring day and the sweet aroma of lituk blossoms filled the air and the cold mountain water flowed swiftly down the creek. Once across the creek, Tagoro turned and sprinted through a small glade of sevemor trees, kicking sevemor cones as he ran. He slowed as he reached the clearing and saw Marak practicing his swordplay.

Marak's saber lay on the ground alongside his sheath and helmet. In its place, Marak was practicing with a large two-edged sword he purchased from a merchant while guarding a caravan. Marak stepped through the paces of battling with an unseen opponent and Tagoro knew better than to interrupt. Instead, Tagoro quietly sat with his back to a sevemor tree and watched Marak practice. Marak gave a nod of recognition to Tagoro without missing a stroke of his battle as he slashed his sword back and forth, taking advantage of the double edges. Tagoro smiled as he watched. As many times as he had watched Marak practice, his friend always managed to invent new methods of destroying his unseen opponents.

As Tagoro watched, Marak delivered a death stroke to his imaginary foe, but instead of stopping, Marak moved hesitantly and turned in a circle. Tagoro had witnessed this routine before and knew that Marak now faced three unseen swordsmen. The Squad Leader continued to circle as if weighing which opponent would lead off the attack. In a sudden flurry of movement, Marak thrust his sword under his arm and pushed backward to skewer the man behind him. Before the movement actually registered with Tagoro, Marak had already swung his sword forward in a powerful upward slash to slice the imaginary man before him. As the sword sliced upward, Marak sank to one knee and pivoted, bringing the two-edged sword around in a sweeping arc designed to cut the legs out from under his third opponent. Tagoro applauded, but Marak was not finished yet. Marak drew a deep breath and began circling again.

"How many?" called Tagoro.

"Six," replied Marak as he suddenly burst into action.

Tagoro shook his head but kept his eyes glued on his friend. Marak did not wait for the six men to get their attack coordinated, but charged straight ahead, holding his sword low. When he approached the edge of the clearing, Marak leaped towards his foe with his long, double-edged sword preceding him. The sword stuck in the tree, which Tagoro assumed was the foe, and Marak continued onward in a roll. Marak completed the roll and sprung to his feet while thrusting both hands out before him. Marak was already on his way to retrieve his sword when Tagoro heard the thuds on either side of himself. Tagoro looked in shock as he recognized the two Omunga Stars stuck in the trees on each side of him. Marak ran past the sevemor tree that held his blade, grabbing the hilt as he passed. Dancing to his right, he

whipped the sword from behind him in an upward slash and followed through with a lateral slice across the unseen man's midsection. Quickly, Marak started backpedaling from the remaining two assailants. Turning as if to make a run for it, Marak suddenly pivoted back to his foes and slashed out with a wicked figure eight and a stabbing thrust to remove the last two opponents.

Tagoro applauded wildly as Marak walked over and picked up a towel to dry his face. The warrior retrieved his two Omunga Stars and placed them in the pouch behind his broad belt.

"One thing does bother me with that approach," chuckled Tagoro. "What if you weren't able to retrieve your sword out of the man's body in time? You were heading straight for the enemy without a weapon."

Marak laughed and thrust his hands outward, flicking his wrists. Both hands immediately filled with throwing knives. "Not exactly defenseless," chuckled Marak, "although I would much rather have my sword against the three opponents who were left. Besides, they all had swords and I'm sure I could get my hands on one of them. There were three of them who no longer needed theirs by then."

Tagoro whistled and shook his head. "Remind me never to cut in front of you in the food line," wisecracked Tagoro. "I have good news for you. I overheard Lord Marshal Grefon talking to Cortain Koors this morning. Lord Ridak's estate Lords are arriving today, all five of them. He's pulling Rybak's squad from the fields as one of the squads to greet the visitors. One of our squads is supposed to replace them and the other will join his squad for the greeting."

"Great!" exclaimed Marak. "This is the chance I have been waiting for. Finally, I'll have the right to talk to the slaves. You don't mind doing the greeting, do you?"

"Mind?" queried Tagoro. "I can't think of anything I would rather do. It is not often that a lowly Squad Leader gets to meet the six Lords of the Situ Clan and their Marshals. Being noticed is the fastest way to promotions in a Clan."

"Wonderful," remarked Marak. "Today we will both get what we desire the most. I better get back and get cleaned up."

Marak gathered his gear and joined Tagoro on the walk back to the barracks. The estate was busy this morning as laborers and household staff ran around preparing for the guests. Every spring, Lord Ridak summoned his five estate Lords to Lituk Valley to report on matters of importance to the whole clan. Each of the five Lords would be accompanied by his Marshal and a contingent of forces to protect the Lord. Lord Ridak was not one of the most powerful Lords in Khadora, but his estates covered more territory than most as the Lituk Valley area was sparsely populated.

Marak rushed through the barracks and into his room where he could wash up and put on a clean uniform. As he emerged from his room into the communal officer's area, he saw that Cortain Koors was waiting for him.

"Having a little trouble getting it together this morning, Squad Leader?" snapped Koors. "I have been looking for you for over half an hour and I didn't appreciate finding you missing."

"My apologies, Cortain," offered Marak. "I felt the need for some early morning sword practice and have just returned."

Koors turned and looked at Tagoro who was neatly attired and standing at attention. "I have special duties for your two squads for the next three days," declared the Cortain. "Squad Leader Rybak's squad

is being moved out of the fields to serve as a greeting guard and his people need to be replaced."

Marak tried to hide his smile as the Cortain stared at the two Squad Leaders. "Lord Marshal Grefon has given the honor of providing greeters this year to me, and two of my squads will be required. Tagoro, your squad will replace Rybak's and manage the slaves. Marak, your men will form up with Rybak's and perform greeting duties."

"But..." protested Marak.

"But nothing," snarled Cortain Koors. "I am in command of this Corte and I will decide which squads perform the duties we are required to provide. You will provide greeting services for the next three days, Marak, and if one of your little misfits gets out of line, you will be visiting the slave quarters on a permanent basis. Get your men ready to assemble."

Cortain Koors spun and marched out of the barracks leaving the two Squad Leaders gaping. As soon as the door to the communal officer's room had closed an Omunga Star flew through the air and lodged in the wood.

"You must control your temper," admonished Tagoro. "He is purposely trying to goad you into a confrontation."

"Perhaps," mused Marak, "his elimination would be seen as a service to Lord Ridak. Every estate strives to rid itself of vermin."

"This decision must have been hard for Koors," suggested Tagoro. "He knows you desire to speak to your mother and, yet, it is an honor to be on the greeting squad. He had to give you one of the two and he would have preferred to give you neither."

"I think Cortain Koors will have other difficult decisions ahead of him," remarked Marak as he retrieved his Omunga Star and entered the main room of the barracks.

Both groups of men were already dressed in clean uniforms and were busy checking their attire for spots or tears that might embarrass the squad when the visitors arrived. Marak and Tagoro snapped orders to the men and they filed out of the barracks in two smooth columns. Rybak's Squad was already assembled and was holding pikes in addition to their usual weapons.

"I will have my Squad handle the gate and road," suggested Squad Leader Rybak when Marak appeared out of the barracks.

Marak simply nodded. Both squads would have the prestige of performing greeting duties, but Rybak's men would get to stand down once the Lords had arrived. Marak's Squad would be pressed into long hours of duty while the Lords met day and night during the next three days. The fact that Rybak's men already had formed with pikes was not lost on Marak. Cortain Koors had made sure that his pet Squad Leader would have the easiest duty while still retaining the honor.

While Squad Leader Rybak's men drifted off towards the main gate of the Situ estate, Marak ordered his men into a tight column and marched them towards the mansion. Lord Marshal Grefon, with the distinctive yellow and green plumes and gold trim on his helmet, stood on the porch by the front steps conversing with his two Lectains, whose helmets were adorned with only green plumes. Each Lectain commanded three Cortains who were each responsible for three or four squads. The officers watched Marak's squad approach and stopped talking when Squad Leader Marak halted the column and saluted

the Lord Marshal.

"Squad Leader Marak reporting as ordered, Lord Marshal," recited Marak.

Lord Marshal Grefon's face frowned as his eyes roved over the assembled squad. "I thought Squad Leader Tagoro was handling this detail," stated Grefon.

"Squad Leader Tagoro has been assigned to duties in the fields, Lord Marshal," Marak answered the unspoken question. "Squad Leader Rybak is handling the main gate and road."

"Very well," Grefon remarked. "Lord Ridak and myself will be personally greeting each Lord and Marshal as they arrive. You will assign one man to each Lord and one to each Marshal to act as liaisons. They will have their own aides, but your appointed men will be responsible for whatever they need during their stay. Two of your men will remain on guard outside the Meeting Chamber, day and night, and two will remain on guard inside the chamber. You will remain with me while I am in the chamber and supervise your men when I am not. Squad Leader Rybak's men will take care of the mansion entrances after the last Lord arrives, but your men are responsible until then. Arrange the schedules of your men and make sure they know the penalty for failure in their duties."

"As you command, Lord Marshal," recited Marak.

Grefon returned to his conversation with the Lectains as Marak issued orders to his men. Security provisions were never this severe at previous meetings and Marak wondered if the Lord Marshal was expecting trouble. He smiled a bit as he realized that Rybak's men would have to share in the duties, after all. He also wondered what orders were issued to Cortain Koors. The Lord Marshal expected Tagoro to be here instead of himself. By the time Marak finished issuing his orders, the Lord Marshal and his Lectains were gone from the porch. Marak led four of his men into the mansion which he had entered only once before and that was six years ago when Lord Marshal Grefon accepted his request to join the Army.

Marak marveled at the grandeur of the mansion as he led his men towards the meeting room. The floors were made of fine, polished marble and the high ceiling was painted in a grand scene of Lord Ridak strolling through a lituk orchard. Tall, marble columns supported the next floor and a wide, carpeted staircase wound its way to the second level after splitting into two separate staircases. In between the columns were pedestals with carved busts of men, only one of which Marak recognized as Lord Ridak. He assumed the others were the Lord's Situ ancestors. On the far right wall of the massive entry foyer stood the large double doors to the Meeting Chamber. It was in this room that Grefon had accepted Marak's petition. The two selected men immediately took up positions on either side of the doors and Marak led the remaining two men into the chamber.

The Meeting Chamber was completely done in dark wood. The floor consisted of smooth wooden panels and the ceiling sported large wooden beams that were carved in the same pattern as the large wooden columns that lined the walls. Between the columns, large tapestries, depicting battle scenes in which the yellow and green forces were conquering armies wearing different colors, hung on the wall. At the far end of the room was a massive marble fireplace and over it hung a portrait of Lord Ridak. The center of the room was filled with a huge wooden table whose dark wood was so finely polished that you could see your reflection well enough to shave. There were enough chairs around the table for Marak to seat his entire squad for dinner.

Marak posted the last two men beside the doors and returned to the entry foyer. Marak was halfway to the doors leading out to the front steps when an elderly woman with gray hair stepped in front of him.

"My, my," she smiled as she looked up at him, "if it isn't young Marak. Don't you look decked out to impress the women?"

Marak looked down at the diminutive woman dressed in the traditional staff garb of a pale yellow tunic with the broad embroidered belt and an embroidered lituk tree inside a green circle on her left breast. His face broke into a wide grin as he recognized the Lord's Minder. Flora had taken charge of Marak when he and his mother arrived at Lituk Valley. Marak was only six at the time and he was hysterical for days while his mother was dressed in slave browns and assigned to the slave shacks. Flora took it upon herself to soothe the small boy and she had been his only friend in those early days. Five or six years old was considered old enough to take the Vows of Service and everyone else treated him with scorn for acting so hysterical. Only Flora offered him comfort and Marak had not seen her in years.

"Flora!" exclaimed Marak. "You are as beautiful as ever."

"So, you have the tongue to impress the ladies, as well," blushed Flora. "You've turned into a mighty handsome man, young Marak, and a Squad Leader already. Oh, I've seen you occasionally through the windows, but to see you close up like this brings joy to my heart. Your mother must be proud."

Marak's face turned into a deep frown at the comment. "I would not know," Marak replied bitterly. "I only see her from a distance. I would love to just talk with her and hold her hand."

It was Flora's turn to frown as she studied him. "I have never been one to contemplate disobedience," Flora finally said, "but a young man should be able to visit with his mother, even if she is a slave. I suppose there are people who resent a slave's boy being in the Army, but when you make Certain you will be able to speak with her whenever you are off duty."

"Should we both live that long," remarked Marak. "I will speak with her soon. I must."

"Marak," cautioned Flora, "do not jeopardize your position for this. I am sure your mother is proud of you and it would kill her to know her son is also a slave. Bide your time, young warrior. Time changes many things, even people's attitudes."

Marak saw Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon heading for the front doors and nodded to Flora as he made his own way to the porch. Lord Ridak was a bull of a man, broad in the shoulders with thick arms and legs and a rusty brown mop of hair on his head. His floor length cape was similar to the Lord Marshal's except for the length, half yellow and half green with a large embroidered lituk tree in a circle.

Marak exited the mansion as two of his men held the doors open for the Lord and Lord Marshal.

The excitement on the porch was building as in the distance an approaching Lord and his escort could be seen. Lord Ridak strained to see which Lord had arrived first, but the distance was still too great. Marak's men formed a corridor as stable hands, dressed in the green tunics that were standard Situ garb, gathered to take the arriving horses.

"Your cousin, Lord Wernik, and Marshal Cadam of Stony Brook," announced Lord Marshal Grefon.

Lord Ridak smiled as the impressive column of soldiers wearing the green and yellow colors of the Situ Clan rode forward. Stony Brook was home to the mines and quarries of the Situ Clan and Lord Wernik was the oldest ruling Lord under Lord Ridak's colors. Two squads of Stony Brook warriors rode on horses sporting blankets of green and yellow and showing the crest of the lituk tree. Holding their lances pointing skyward and gleaming in the morning light, the column of soldiers filled Lord Ridak with pride.

Lord Wernik showed gray hair under his headband and helmet, which was adorned with the green and yellow plumes. He grinned openly as he approached the front of the house. Marshal Cadam held a dark and foreboding glare as he glanced around at the placement of soldiers present. His black hair and goatee clashed with the gay yellow of his uniform. All Situ armies were dressed the same regardless of which estate they came from, except the Lord Marshal and Lord Ridak, who had gold trim signifying the head of the Situ Army and the head of the Situ Clan.

Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon greeted their counterparts and waited patiently as Squad Leader Marak introduced the assigned liaisons. As Lord Ridak led the visitors indoors, Marak led the Stony Brook soldiers to a waiting barracks and saw that they were settled in before returning to the porch. He arrived back just in time to repeat the procedure for Lord Zerik and Marshal Roak from Raven's Point, the Situ estate located on the seacoast which specializes in seafood.

After an hour of idleness in which Marak talked with Squad Leaders from the other estates, Lord Caruko and Marshal Flutay from River's Bend arrived. River's Bend was downstream from Lituk Valley and supplied cloth and clothing from the herds of clova kept there. Any river shipments to the rest of the country also left from River's Bend.

The aura of excitement subsided as the day wore on, until mid-afternoon when Lord Horkad and Marshal Simi arrived from Forest Deep, the estate which bred the Situ horses and wasooki. The contingent from Forest Deep included a wagon with six, large wasooki which Lord Horkad presented to Lord Ridak to feed the household while the meetings took place. Marak gazed at the strange, massive beasts and their long, red-haired coats. Unlike most estates, Forest Deep bred their wasooki for tenderness and taste, not for their ability to pull loads.

Lord Marshal Grefon kept Marak busy for the rest of the afternoon by continually requesting men to run errands or organize activities for the visiting soldiers. Just before sunset, Lord Lashendo and Marshal Garouk arrived with the contingent from Fardale, the estate furthest away, which produced grain and vegetables. Fardale was Lord Ridak's newest estate and was his opening attempt at increasing his holdings into areas close to rival Lords. Unlike the four traditional Situ estates, Lord Ridak had claimed Fardale only four years earlier and most soldiers considered it the frontier.

Squad Leader Rybak's men followed the Fardale contingent to the mansion and, after greetings were completed, dispersed to guard the perimeter of the mansion. Marak posted two of his men in the entry foyer and ordered the rest to get some sleep so they would be available to relieve the Meeting Chamber guards later. Marak followed Lord Marshal Grefon into the Meeting Chamber and stood behind his chair.

When Lord Ridak seated himself at the head of the table, the room fell quiet and the meeting officially began. The Lord of all Situ asked for the status of his holdings and, one by one, the Lords reported the condition of their estates. Most of the reports dealt with finances, markets, and population counts and Marak became engrossed with the dialog as he began to realize the full extent of Lord Ridak's holdings. He already knew that the Situ were not a major clan in Khadora, but the impressive numbers presented at the meeting gave him an idea of how large the holdings were. The Estate Marshals reported on the strength of their armies and Marak was awestruck. He always believed that the real strength of the Situ was in Lituk Valley and that the remote estates had only token forces. The reality was much different. Each estate had its own army only slightly smaller than the one Lord Marshal Grefon commanded here.

The meeting broke for dinner and Lord Marshal Grefon pulled Marak aside. "Your men behaved admirably today, Squad Leader," the Lord Marshal praised. "You will, of course, remind them that

whatever is heard within these walls is not to be spoken of. Take this opportunity to check on your squad."

Marak made the rounds of his men and reaffirmed the need for silence on the affairs of the Situ Clan. Marak and his men were fed separately by the household staff and Marak was waiting at the doors to the Meeting Chamber when the Lords and Marshals returned from their dinner. Everyone took their places and, once again, Lord Ridak convened the meeting.

It was during this second session that Marak got some idea of the need for the increased security. Lord Lashendo of Fardale was telling about his attempts to clear the Sitari Valley and the attacks of the Chula. His loss of men was considerable, but not devastating because of the size of his estate.

"The message was, My Lord," Lord Lashendo stated, "that the next time we entered Sitari Valley, the Chula would not only kill all of our men, but would attack the estate, as well."

"Marshal Garouk," Lord Marshal Grefon interrupted, "have you made any further attempts to enter the valley?"

Marshal Garouk looked towards Lord Ridak before answering. "We have not, Lord Marshal," he stated. "I think it is best if we beef up our estate defenses before we make another attempt. I have little doubt that the Chula will attempt to actually attack the estate and it will present the perfect opportunity to wipe them out, once and for all. After we lay the perfect trap at the Fardale estate we will send in a small expeditionary force to provoke them. Once the Chula are eliminated we can clear the Sitari Valley."

"And you feel that you have sufficient forces to accomplish this task?" Lord Marshal Grefon questioned.

"Yes, Lord Marshal," assured Marshal Garouk.

The Lord Marshal fixed Lord Ridak with a questioning gaze and the Situ Lord nodded. "We shall discuss your plans before the meeting days are over, Marshal Garouk," Lord Ridak stated. "Lord Lashendo, please continue with your briefing."

The reports from the far estates continued for several hours and the meeting was ended for the day. Marak made another check of his men and ordered the replacements to take their posts while those guarding the Meeting Chamber were given leave to sleep.

When Marak was returning to his barracks he saw his mother leaving her shack. Impulsively, he decided to intercept her and talk with her. Knowing the punishment for getting caught, Marak covertly slid behind the barracks and made his way towards the slave quarters.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

Glenda

Marak slipped cautiously around the last barrack building and gazed over the open ground leading towards the slave quarters. The slave shacks were surrounded by a fence and any slave leaving the compound could be killed on sight unless they were in the company of an overseer. Marak did not have to worry about being mistaken for a slave, but anyone who saw him would know that he was breaking

the rules and would report him. Facilities were not provided in the slave shacks and Marak knew the reason for his mother's journey. He also knew he would not have much time before she returned to her shack and getting to talk with her then would be impossible.

Quickly, Marak sprinted across the open area and crouched alongside the fence. Rybak's squad was on the mansion perimeter duty and the open area he just crossed could be visible to them if they were alert.

Without pursuing that nagging thought, Marak stood up and vaulted over the fence. As quickly as he could, Marak ran to the rear of the first slave shack. He shook his head and sighed as he realized what he should have known all along, there was no way that he was going to talk with his mother and not get caught.

Determined to do what should have been his right, Marak pressed on. He stealthily moved from shack to shack, cursing the color of his uniform each time he had to cross an open space. Swiftly, he gained the footpath into the small patch of trees that afforded a little privacy for the slaves. His mother was already returning towards the shack when she stopped short at the sight of a soldier.

"Marak!" she exclaimed softly. "You should not be here. Go, before you are caught."

Marak walked to his mother and embraced her. "I will not go," he stated simply.

He grabbed her hand and led her off the path to a clear area between two trees where they could sit. He gently lowered her to the ground and sat down beside her.

"Mother, it is not right to forbid us the opportunity to talk," Marak began. "I have sorely missed you and if there is a price to pay for the pleasure of your company for a little while, I will pay it."

"But, they will make you a slave," Glenda protested. "I do not want to live to see my son a slave. You must go back."

"Enough talk about what they will do," sighed Marak. "I am already here and the punishment is no greater for a longer visit. I want to know about you, not what Lord Ridak wants."

Glenda hugged her son and cried. "You are so much like your father," she sobbed, "stubborn as a wasooki and as brave as the mightiest warrior. I know you watch me from the orchard. I wish you wouldn't. It makes my burden harder to bear. You must get on with your own life and forget me. I am paying the price of my own foolishness and there is no need for you to feel bad about my predicament. Look at you, a Squad Leader at such a young age. You make me proud."

"What about you, Mother," quizzed Marak. "You seem to be moving slower when I watch you these days. Are you feeling well?"

"You are observant," sighed Glenda. "My body is not as young as it once was, but I get around all right. I have no particular ailments, just a need for more rest than before."

"I vow to get you out of here," declared Marak. "If it is the last thing that I do, you shall be free again."

"Hush," ordered Glenda as she wrapped her arms around her son's neck. "You should never make such a vow. If anyone other than I heard it, you would be tending the fields alongside me. Where is your father's necklace? You should be wearing it."

"It is in my keepbox in the barracks," Marak said. "There were too many questions about it and I

decided it would be safer in the keepbox than around my neck."

"Wear it," ordered Glenda. "It is all you have to remind you of him. Keep it next to your heart always."

"Why do I need to be reminded of him?" barked Marak. "In the fourteen years you have been captive, he has never tried to see you. If he is not dead, he deserves to be."

Marak never expected the slap that stung his cheek. "Never talk that way about him," she scolded. "He was the best man I have ever met and you should strive to be like him. He does not know what happened to me. He was told that I am dead. It was the only way I could think of to protect him. Lord Ridak would have killed him as soon as he showed himself. I can live with my punishment, but I could not live knowing my actions had killed him. I only wish I had been able to leave you with him. He loved you so and the two of you would have gotten along well together."

"I'm sorry, Mother," apologized Marak. "I have no memories of him now. It is hard to appreciate a father you have never known. I know he did not live on the estate with us. Where did he live and why didn't he live on the estate at Forest Deep?"

Sounds from outside the fence of the slave compound silenced Glenda's answer. "You must go now, if you are to get free," she whispered. "Do not come again. Whenever you make Cortain, it will be soon enough for me."

Glenda kissed Marak gently and rose. Within seconds she was back on the path returning to her shack. Marak stood and strained to hear which direction the noises were coming from. Unable to pinpoint the direction of the noise, Marak headed through the trees to an open area near the fence and vaulted over it. Taking a long loop away from the slave shacks, Marak walked through the orchard to the trail which led to the creek. He stopped at the creek and cupped the cold, clear water into his hands and rinsed his face. He waited a while before taking the path which led back to the barracks.

As he neared the barracks, Squad Leader Rybak walked by and grinned a malicious smile. Marak knew that meant trouble. For a few stolen moments with his mother, Marak was going to pay back years of hard work. He ignored Rybak and entered the barracks. Most of the men were already sleeping and the few who were not did not meet his gaze. He opened the door to the officer's communal area and was not surprised to see Cortain Koors sitting with Squad Leader Tagoro. Tagoro's face told the tale neatly. His pained expression and the Cortain's unusual glee sealed Marak's fate.

"Where have you been, Squad Leader Marak?" sang Cortain Koors.

"I am off duty," Marak stated. "My movements are not subject to your scrutiny."

"Well," chuckled Koors, "that depends on what your movements were, doesn't it? Tell me where you were and I will decide if it is any of my business."

"I went for a walk," Marak stated simply.

"And where did this walk take you?" questioned Koors.

"Into the woods and down by the creek," Marak said.

"All right," spat Cortain Koors, "let's stop playing games, Squad Leader. Did you enter the slave compound this evening?"

"Yes," surrendered Marak.

"As I already knew," Koors offered. "It is time for us to speak with the Lord Marshal, Squad Leader. Although I doubt I shall be calling you by that title much longer. I knew your kind was not to be trusted and I have waited for this slip of yours for a long time. Finally, you will be placed where you deserve to be placed, in the shacks with your mother. Let's go, slave Marak. We have a meeting to attend with the Lord Marshal."

Marak turned around and marched back through the barracks. He heard Koors behind him ordering Tagoro not to mention anything to anybody until he was given leave to do so. Obviously, Koors wanted the pleasure of informing everyone himself. Marak picked up his stride in a last measure of defiance and smiled when he heard Koors huffing to keep up without appearing to be running after Marak. When Marak reached the mansion, Squad Leader Rybak was on the porch with the same malicious grin and Marak simply passed him and entered the mansion.

Once in the entry foyer, Marak stopped and waited for Koors. The Cortain entered the foyer and stopped to catch his breath. Marak felt a small amount of satisfaction in causing the Cortain some discomfort. The man was supposed to be a military man and not overweight and out of shape. Marak felt Koors would be better suited to watching the kitchen staff.

The Cortain caught his breath and led the way through the entry foyer to the Lord Marshal's suite. He knocked and heard the answering call permitting him to enter. Koors puffed up his chest and led the way into Grefon's suite. The door opened into a sitting room which was austere for the mansion. The floor was wooden as were the walls and both were elegant. The only furniture in the room was a pair of chairs with a small table between them. There were two doors off the sitting room, one on each side of the room. The door to the sleeping quarters was closed, but the door to the Lord Marshal's study was open and the glow of a lantern showed on the floor.

Koors led Marak into the study and saluted. The study, by contrast, was quite busy. Grefon's desk was a rich fargi wood, polished to a reflective surface, and quite massive. Three walls were lined with bookshelves, while the fourth held a couch, table and reading chair. Above the couch was a large wall map of Khadora. The Lord Marshal was at his desk and Marshal Garouk was sitting in a chair in front of the desk. Grefon indicated that the pair should enter and Marshal Garouk excused himself, closing the door as he left. The Lord Marshal waited patiently to discover the nature of the unusual visit.

"Lord Marshal," Cortain Koors began, "we have a disciplinary matter to discuss."

Grefon shook his head and stared at the two men whom he knew to be at odds with each other. "Does this matter concern any of our guests?" the Lord Marshal asked.

"No, Lord Marshal, it concerns Squad Leader Marak," declared Koors.

"If the matter is internal to Lituk Valley," stated Grefon, "it should wait until the meeting days are over and our guests have returned home."

"But it is quite grievous, Lord Marshal," prompted the Cortain.

"I am sure you would not bother me if it were otherwise, Cortain Koors," sighed Grefon. "Whatever the problem, it will have to wait. Punishments are public events and I will not have our guests distracted from their business with Lord Ridak. If it involves a death, bury the body and we will discuss it when the

meeting days are over. You are both to report to me as soon as the last Lord leaves the estate. Until that time, you will both carry out your orders as they have been given. Dismissed."

The two soldiers saluted and retreated to the sitting room, past Marshal Garouk and out the door. Koors muttered something under his breath and Marak took the opportunity to leave and check on his men at the Meeting Chamber. All four men were efficiently alert and Marak sprinted back to the barracks and into the officer's communal room. Tagoro was still sitting where he was when Marak left.

"What happened?" questioned Tagoro. "You have barely been gone long enough for him to chew you out. Will it be slave duty?"

Marak sat down and stretched his legs out. "I won't know until the meeting days are over," explained Marak. "The Lord Marshal wants nothing to distract our guests and has put off hearing of the affair until they have left. At least I will have a few more days of freedom before Koors gets his long-awaited wish."

"So, you think it will be the worst?" quizzed Tagoro.

"Depends on what you mean by the worst," sighed Marak. "It will be slavery or death, but I am not sure which is worse. I think Koors will push for slavery so he can gloat over me every day."

"I can't believe it, Marak," remarked Tagoro. "You knew the risks all along. How could you have gone over the fence?"

"How I managed to put it off for so long is what amazes me, my friend," smiled Marak. "It is probably to your credit that I have resisted this long. This whole system of slavery is wrong and I could never last for long with it intact. I have not talked to my mother since I was fourteen. What type of cruel monsters can believe that is just or even acceptable? I kill for these people and I put my life in peril for them. Do they have the right to demand more of me than that?"

Tagoro shook his head sadly. "Why don't you run away?" he posed. "You have a few days to plan it. I will help you."

Marak smiled and placed his hand on Tagoro's arm. "I am beginning to think as my mother thinks," Marak responded. "I will not let you ruin your life for my sake; however, I am deeply touched by your friendship. I cannot run away and leave my mother behind to take my punishment. I will stay and accept the Lord Marshal's decree. Now, I must get to bed. If I stray one hair from my duties for the rest of the meeting days, Koors will find some way to make my punishment more bitter than the lituk fruit. Good night, friend."

Marak slept fitfully and awoke feeling as if he had not slept at all. He quickly cleaned up and donned a fresh uniform. Tagoro already had both squads assembled and ready and Marak led his men off to the mansion. All of the men of Koors Corte, including his own and Tagoro's, looked at him differently this morning. Marak realized that they all knew and figured Rybak had purposely let it slip. He had no doubt that one of Rybak's men had alerted the Squad Leader and Rybak ran immediately to Koors. Marak hoped none of the visitors learned of the problem. While he felt justified in what he had done, Lord Marshal Grefon was not at fault for the rules and Marak did not wish to have Grefon embarrassed by the incident.

Inside the mansion, nobody paid any particular attention to Marak, not even Grefon. The morning meeting centered around Lord Ridak's desire to expand along the coast near Raven's Point. This push could lead to battles with Lord Saycher of the Morgar Clan. Lord Saycher was a political ally of Lord

Quillo, head of the Organila Clan and a member of the Lords Council. If Lord Quillo got the Lords Council involved in the affair, Lord Ridak would come out on the losing end. Different strategies were offered by each of the Clan Lords and their Marshals and Marak was surprised to find out that nobody even thought of negotiation as an option. Nor did anyone suggest driving a wedge between Lord Quillo and Lord Saycher before the advent of hostilities. The only thoughts expressed dealt with troop strength and from which estates to draw the armies.

The midday meal came and went and the discussion turned to expanding at River's Bend to cut off Lord Saycher's access to the river. Some thought this would hamper any help destined for the Morgar Clan that might be coming from the Council. Others thought it would open a second front and lead to total war. By the evening meal, Lord Ridak had shelved his expansion plans at Raven's Point until he could give it more study.

The evening session dealt mostly with finances and commodities. Each Lord had a chance to describe which commodities were costing him too much and others suggested complex trading deals that could bring the cost of the commodities down. Eventually, Lord Ridak adjourned the meeting for the day and everyone filed out of the Meeting Chamber. Marak returned to the barracks and ordered the replacements for the inside guards. As he led the replacements into the entry foyer of the mansion, he saw Squad Leader Rybak emerging from Lord Marshal Grefon's suite. Rybak either did not see Marak or pointedly ignored him. After making sure his men were in place, Marak returned to the barracks and went to bed.

All of the plans and discussions heard in the Meeting Chamber dulled Marak's dread of slavery and he slept well. This was the last scheduled day of talks and the remote estate contingents should be leaving the next morning. The men of his Corte were still looking strangely at Marak this morning and he couldn't tell if it was sorrow or just disappointment they were transmitting.

As he led his men towards their posts, Marak saw Rybak and Koors conversing outside one of the side doors of the mansion. He wasn't sure what they were cooking up, but decided to push it out of his mind and concentrate on his duties. The men assigned as liaisons had pretty light duty so far and not even the men posted to the Meeting Chamber had any complaints. Marak had heard complimentary comments given to both Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon about his men's efficiency and attentiveness. If it weren't for his little escapade into the slave compound, this would have been a shining moment in Marak's career.

The morning session picked up where the evening's had ended and centered on commodities and trading. The afternoon session turned to matters that affected the remote estates, but not Lituk Valley. The only solid proposal to come out of the session, in Marak's opinion, was Lord Ridak's approval of a road between Fardale and Forest Deep to allow for grain shipments and wasooki shipments to pass between the two estates without having to go through Lituk Valley. Even that approval was hampered by the fact that other clans controlled some of the intervening land. Both Lord Lashendo of Fardale and Lord Horkad of Forest Deep vowed to commit whatever troops were necessary to get the road built over the other clans' objections. Neither thought of the possibility that the intervening clans might actually benefit from the road and might be willing to participate in its building rather than fight to prevent it.

The talk finally turned to Fardale's problems with the Chula. Lord Lashendo retold of his two attempts to gain the Sitari Valley as part of the estate and the disastrous results of both. Because of the Chula resistance, crop production of grain would be greatly reduced next year. Lord Lashendo stated that all of the tillable lands of Fardale were already used up and without the Sitari Valley he would have to default on contracts for next year. This statement did not sit well with Lord Ridak and the discussion turned to ways to make up the shortfall. If the Situ failed to fulfill their contracts, they would lose a tremendous

amount of trade and not just on the grain, but other contracts would also disappear. Khadorans had little faith in people who did not deliver according to their contracts. It was not considered dishonesty to default on a contract if you truly thought you would be able to deliver, but buyers chose to purchase from clans who delivered what was agreed to. If anyone thought the failure to deliver was intentional, war or dissolution of the clan could result. After it was determined that only Fardale had a chance at making up the shortfall in grain, Lord Ridak allowed Lord Lashendo to continue.

Some Marshals asked about the battles with the Chula and other Lords asked what the Chula were like. It was a red-faced Lord Lashendo who admitted he had never seen one and only one man had survived out of the two engagements. He did go on to reiterate his grand plan to exterminate the Chula by baiting them.

"It is time we discussed your plan for eradicating the Chula," interrupted Lord Marshal Grefon. "I do not think you are ready to bait them. I have reviewed your troop strength with Marshal Garouk and discussed the matter with Lord Ridak. I plan to reinforce Fardale with a Corte from Lituk Valley before the trap is sprung. In the meantime, you should make no further efforts at clearing Sitari Valley."

Lord Lashendo was visibly shaken to have the Lord Marshal dictate policy to him as if the Lord of Fardale was not capable of handling his own affairs, but he kept his mouth shut. With no avenue for discussion to continue on, Lord Ridak announced the end of the meetings and informed everyone that a feast had been prepared for them for this final evening. Everyone filed out of the room except for Lord Marshal Grefon.

"Squad Leader Marak," Grefon began, "the visiting soldiers are also being feasted this evening. Your men who serve as liaisons must continue their duties until the morning, but the rest of your men may join the guest soldiers at their feast if you wish. I will have no further need of your services."

Marak went around and dismissed his men with Lord Marshal Grefon's invitation to feast. All of the men opted to join the visiting soldiers and Marak joined them as well. A huge bonfire roared in an open area among the barracks and a huge wasooki was being roasted over it. Marak inhaled the aroma of the searing meat and realized how hungry he was. The Fardale contingent had brought a variety of squash, beans, carrots and peas. From Raven's Point there were crab and clams and the River's Bend contingent contributed clova meat, which was a little tough, but extremely tasty.

The Stony Brook boys were the favorites of the camp, though. They had managed to bring two barrels of mountain ale, which they had kept tied to a bridge in the cold river. Feeling slightly outdone, River's Bend offered up a large tin of bocco and everybody stuffed their pipe and lit up.

Marak truly enjoyed himself for the first time in many years. He drank and smoked and feasted on large chunks of wasooki. Ironic, he thought, feast tonight, starve tomorrow. He quickly pushed his morbid thoughts away and listened to a soldier from Fardale telling tales about the Chula. The listeners marveled at the images of barbarian warriors riding tigers into battle. Another soldier from Fardale retold the last battle from the words of someone called Togi, a lumberman who was the sole survivor. Outraged cries rose from the fireside as he described the wagon loaded with dead bodies and body parts that Togi had been forced to drive home. The Fardale contingent seemed to drink more than the others and none of them expressed relief that they were leaving in the morning to return home. Eventually, everyone partied out and Marak returned to the barracks and fell asleep instantly.

The morning came and Marak was resigned to accept it. He dressed quickly and assembled his men for the farewell. He marched his squad to the front of the mansion and arranged them as he had for the greeting.

Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon came out the front door with Lord Lashendo and Marshal Garouk. After short farewell speeches, Lord Lashendo dismissed the liaisons and the Fardale contingent mounted and rode off towards the main gate.

Lord Horkad and Marshal Simi of Forest Deep left next, quickly followed by Lord Caruko and Marshal Flutay of River's Bend. Lord Zerik of Raven's Point held a prolonged conversation with Lord Ridak until Marshal Roak interrupted and led him to the waiting horses. Lord Wernik and Marshal Cadam from Stony Brook were the last to go, with Marshal Cadam making some joke about mountain ale on his way past Marak's men.

Everyone stood and watched the Stony Brook warriors leave through the gate. As soon as they disappeared, Cortain Koors emerged from the barracks and strode over to the steps to the mansion.

"I believe we have a meeting scheduled, Lord Marshal," smiled Koors.

The Lord Marshal nodded and started inside with Koors and Marak right behind him. He caught motion out of the corner of his eye and quickly twirled to see what it was. Every one of Marak's men had turned their wristbands inside out. Grefon gazed into the fields and saw that Tagoro's men had done the same. Fury filled the Lord Marshal's eyes when he looked for Squad Leader Rybak and saw that his men, who were returning from the main gate, also had their wristbands inverted.

He waited impatiently as Rybak and his men approached the mansion. He noticed that Rybak was the only one besides Koors and Marak who had not turned his wristband.

"Squad Leader Rybak," commanded the Lord Marshal, "instruct all of the men in the proper wearing of their wristbands. Anyone who hesitates to make it right is to be flogged on the spot. I will have no insubordination under my command. Report to me as soon as you are done."

Rybak smiled and saluted as he turned to administer the Lord Marshal's wrath upon his fellow soldiers.

Turning to Koors and Marak, Grefon snapped, "Let us find out what folly has been happening behind my back. Both of you to my study, now."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 4

Lord Marshal Grefon

Lord Marshal Grefon led the way into his study and sat behind his desk leaving Cortain Koors and Squad Leader Marak standing in front of his desk. For several moments the Lord Marshal straightened his desk and ignored the two soldiers standing before him. Eventually, Squad Leader Rybak entered the study and the Lord Marshal looked up.

"Your report, Squad Leader Rybak," ordered Grefon.

"All wrist bands are properly displayed, Lord Marshal," reported Rybak.

"Is there further need for disciplinary action on this matter?" quizzed Grefon.

"No, Lord Marshal," stated Rybak. "No one hesitated to make the wristbands correct."

"Very well, Squad Leader," accepted the Lord Marshal. "Please wait in the sitting room until I need you and close the door when you leave."

Squad Leader Rybak closed the door to the study and disappeared.

"Now, Cortain Koors," began the Lord Marshal, "you have a disciplinary item that needs to be discussed. What is it?"

"Squad Leader Marak has broken his Vows of Service, Lord Marshal," smiled Koors. "He has broken the rules by speaking to slaves without orders. As the Lord Marshal is aware, his acceptance in the Army is now forfeit as is his freedom."

Grefon sat and stared at the two men standing before him, switching his gaze from one to the other. He knew them to be two soldiers who were loyal to the Situ Clan and the Army, but he also knew them as bitter enemies.

"Are you stating your claim to his person?" asked Grefon.

"Oh, no, Lord Marshal," grinned Cortain Koors. "The violation was not against me, but against the Lord of the Situ Clan whom the Squad Leader gave his vows. I am merely performing my duty in reporting the infraction."

"I see," Grefon said straight-faced. "This is an extremely serious matter. You saw this Squad Leader talking with slaves and have verified that he was without orders?"

"I did not actually see Marak talking with a slave, Lord Marshal," answered Koors, "but it is common knowledge that the Squad Leader went to speak with his mother. As for his orders, I am his Cortain and issue his orders personally. His orders did not include any association with slaves."

The Lord Marshal stared at Marak, looking for any signs of emotion, but the Squad Leader just stood at attention and looked straight ahead. "A man is not stripped out of the Army and into slave browns on common knowledge, Cortain," instructed the Lord Marshal. "If you did not see him talking to slaves, then what is your evidence?"

"His own admittance," beamed Koors. "I was waiting in his barracks for him to return and I asked him straight out if he had been in the slave compound. His own admission is sufficient guilt."

The Lord Marshal rose and walked to the window overlooking the orchard and barren field. The men of Tagoro's squad were performing their duties, but each of them kept an eye on the Lord Marshal's window.

"Squad Leader Marak," asked Grefon without taking his gaze from the window, "is the account given by Cortain Koors accurate?"

"It is, Lord Marshal," Marak answered.

"You have shown great promise, Squad Leader," declared the Lord Marshal. "You were raised to Squad Leader after only four years and your efforts have proved to me that it was a wise decision on my

part. Your men are the most efficient and best trained in the entire Army. What could have been going through your head to risk all of this and your own freedom on a whim?"

The Lord Marshal returned to his chair and watched Marak as the Squad Leader tried to justify his actions.

"Lord Marshal," stated Marak, "I have enjoyed my service to the Army of the Situ Clan and I have always tried to perform at my best, but since I joined the Army, I have not been allowed to speak with my mother. While I would not hesitate to put my life on the line for the Situ Clan, I could no longer tolerate the injustice which has been forced upon me by my superiors. Five minutes of speaking with my mother does not make me any less effective as a soldier, which is the function I perform for the Situ Clan."

"So," summarized Grefon, "you feel that following orders and honoring your pledge to Lord Ridak are not the proper duties of a soldier? Do you think an Army can be run with every soldier interpreting the rules as he sees fit?"

"Certainly not, Lord Marshal," agreed Marak, "but I also do not believe that a just ruler intentionally inflicts pain on his loyal supporters. Does Lord Ridak think that I kill his enemies for the food he puts on my plate? Do you believe that I put my own body in harms way for the fine bed and roof that has been provided? Men serve for a number of reasons, Lord Marshal. Some serve out of fear and some serve out of loyalty and respect. Still others join to aid in a cause they believe in."

"And which reason has you serving the Army?" interrupted the Lord Marshal.

"I have served out of loyalty and respect, Lord Marshal," answered Marak. "Loyalty and respect are attributes that swing both ways, Lord Marshal. Every day of my service in the Army has become harder to bear. Every day that I watch my mother in the fields being abused by the Lord I serve becomes another day in which my respect dwindles. Every day I watch men being belittled by superior officers, whose only existence is seen as that of a tormentor, and it lowers my respect."

"Are you quite through Squad Leader?" snapped the Lord Marshal.

"No, Lord Marshal, I am not," retorted Marak. "The men under my command perform well because I treat them with respect, respect they deserve. The men in this Army are paid the same whether they excel at their job or not. My men do not excel because they are getting more than the next man, they excel because it is appreciated. I know you agree with what I am saying because you treat your own men with respect, but your Army is large and those under you do not follow your ideals. Cortain Koors has intentionally been after this moment for six years, six years in which he has done everything he could to get me out of the Army."

Koors started shifting uneasily, but his face still held his wide grin. Lord Marshal Grefon shook his head and stared at the Squad Leader.

"Are you now going to place all of the blame for this incident on Cortain Koors?" sighed Grefon.

"No, Lord Marshal," replied Marak. "The incident is my own doing and no one else deserves the blame. I am not trying to escape your justice. I am explaining what path brought me to this office so that you may help others avoid a similar mistake. I am leaving some good men behind, men who have been treated with respect and need to be treated so in the future. If they are not, you will lose their efficiency. I guess what I am trying to say is simple. Do with me what you will, but for the sake of the Army, make the

changes that are necessary to ensure that it does not happen to others."

"Are you suggesting that I get rid of Cortain Koors?" questioned Grefon.

"No, Lord Marshal," Marak sighed. "Koors is only a symptom of the problem. His removal would help only three squads. What I am suggesting is that part of your training be to instill respect for the rest of the men who constitute your Army. Treat the men with respect and they will respect your every order."

"Lord Marshal," interrupted Cortain Koors, "with all respect, I do not have to stand for this insolent slave deriding my character. What his justification is for his outlandish behavior is unimportant. The fact remains that he has violated his Vows of Service and the punishment is quite clear. Not even the Lord Marshal can override the Vows. To do so would violate your own Vows. You cannot allow Marak to remain as Squad Leader any longer, not even until the official sentencing by Lord Ridak."

"I am quite aware of my Vows, Cortain," snapped Grefon. "The fact is, Marak is no longer a Squad Leader. Marak, did you discuss this problem with anyone?"

"Only Squad Leader Tagoro, Lord Marshal," answered Marak. "He was present when Cortain Koors and I spoke on the evening in question."

"In your opinion," quizzed Grefon, "would he discuss this problem with anyone else?"

"No, Lord Marshal, he would not," Marak replied.

"I am, then, puzzled by the annoying show of support for you this morning," commented Grefon. "I do not appreciate such displays in my Army. I find them insubordinate. Cortain, who have you spoken with concerning this affair?"

"Everyone in the Corte knows about it, Lord Marshal," stated Koors as his smile turned to a tight-lipped grimace.

"And how do they know?" prompted the Lord Marshal. "I wish to hear how this confidential matter has become common knowledge."

"Well, Lord Marshal," fretted Koors, "one of Rybak's men spotted a soldier leaping the fence into the slave compound and reported it to Squad Leader Rybak. Rybak immediately informed me and I waited for Marak in his barracks."

"That explains how two men knew that some soldier was in violation," remarked Grefon impatiently. "What I asked was how the entire Corte knew that soldier was Marak."

Beads of sweat formed on Koors' brow. While he had been successful in getting Marak forced into slavery, he had erred in letting the knowledge out before sentencing. It was not a serious offense, but Grefon could take his yellow plume for it and lower him back to Squad Leader if he was angry enough. Koors contemplated lying about it and decided to just stretch the truth a little.

"I did discuss the matter with Squad Leader Rybak," admitted Koors. "Perhaps some of the men overheard us."

Lord Marshal Grefon again rose from his chair and paced to the window. He could strangle Marak for giving in to temptation and Koors for being such a belligerent fool. The worst part of it was that he could

come out of this looking like a fool, himself.

"Both of you wait in the sitting room and send Squad Leader Rybak in," ordered the Lord Marshal.

Squad Leader Rybak entered and closed the door before saluting.

"Squad Leader Rybak," began Grefon, "how did the men in your squad learn of Marak's plight?"

Rybak noticed the lack of the words 'Squad Leader' in the Lord Marshal's question and smiled.

Evidently, Grefon was still concerned about the wrist bands and was making it part of the same disciplinary action. It also sounded like Koors had probably tried to blame him for spreading the word. While Koors had been a golden ladder to the rank of Squad Leader, Rybak was not about to slide down that ladder for his Cortain. "Cortain Koors and I spoke of it in the barracks," Rybak answered.

"Do you think the men overheard your conversation?" quizzed Grefon.

"Without a doubt, Lord Marshal," answered Rybak. "They were all around us. Cortain Koors wanted everybody to know that he had finally succeeded in getting Marak. I can only assume that my men told the other squads in the Corte. I certainly did not."

Grefon nodded and was about to dismiss Rybak when another question popped up. "On the morning of the first meeting day, did you hear me give orders to Cortain Koors?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord Marshal," admitted Rybak. "I was present at the time."

"Was it clear that my orders were for Marak to have slave detail?" queried the Lord Marshal.

"Yes, Lord Marshal," answered Rybak. "Cortain Koors, complained that you were ruining his plan before he changed the orders."

"Thank you, Squad Leader," sighed Grefon. "You will not speak of this meeting unless I direct you to. You are dismissed. Send the others in as you leave."

Rybak snapped a salute and quickly fled to the sitting room where he informed Marak and Koors to return to the study as he left. Marak and Koors entered the study and closed the door. The Lord Marshal opened a drawer in his desk and withdrew a sheet of paper and handed it to Cortain Koors.

"As you can see, Cortain," declared Grefon, "I have a bit of a problem here. You have brought before me a man accused of violating his Vows of Service by talking with slaves. A man in the Army with a rank of Cortain is allowed that privilege. If you read the pronouncement in your hands, you will notice that its purpose is to elevate Squad Leader Marak to the rank of Cortain. It should be duly noted that both Lord Ridak and I signed this document the day before the first meeting day. While you may argue that Squad Leader Marak violated his Vows of Service, the accused may argue that Cortain Marak did not."

Marak's eyes grew wide as he followed the conversation. No one had ever made Cortain in six years that he knew of. The elation quickly subsided to regret. If only he had held out for a few more days, he would have been able to see his mother without this disciplinary action. He had already made his grand speech belittling the Lord Marshal's Army and Grefon would be within his rights to tear up the pronouncement.

"But this is impossible," squealed Koors. "It is not official, no pronouncement was made. He didn't even

know about his promotion when he leaped over the fence."

"You are quite right about his knowing," nodded the Lord Marshal. "Nevertheless, he was officially a Cortain at the time. The announcement was being held back until there was an opening for a Cortain.

Lord Ridak is against expanding the Army to include another Corte, so the announcement of his promotion was put off until someone died or retired."

"Well, that is certainly not going to happen any time soon," smiled Koors. "If you do not plan to take any action on this matter, I am within my rights to petition Lord Ridak to rule on it. Whether he was a Cortain or a Squad Leader, he violated his Vows of Service because he had neither knowledge of his promotion nor orders which allowed him such liberties."

Lord Marshal Grefon held up his hands in surrender. "If you are adamant about appealing to Lord Ridak, there is nothing I can do to stop you. In all fairness to the accused, though, he should be made aware that I issued orders to you placing him in the fields with the slaves on the day of the first meeting. Technically, his orders were to be with the slaves for the duration of the meeting days."

"You did not specify which squad I was to use," blurted Koors. "I must have misunderstood..." Koors looked at the smile on the Lord Marshal's face and knew he was beaten. The way Rybak averted his eyes when he had left the Lord Marshal's study flashed into Koors mind, and the Cortain knew he was in more trouble than Marak. Marak, at least, had some excuse, Koors did not. The Lord Marshal was never a stickler on how his orders were carried out as long as they were accomplished, but on this occasion he had specifically ordered Marak into the fields. Rybak had squealed and there was little Koors could do about it.

"Cortain Koors," addressed Grefon, "you have given long years of service to this Clan ... over twenty years ... if I am not mistaken. Lord Ridak would probably not be as impressed with that as I am. I think an officer with your fine service to the Situ Clan should have an elegant retirement party, not a trial. Of course, nobody has made any accusations against you ... yet."

The Lord Marshal handed Koors writing materials and sighed. Koors stared at the paper in Grefon's outstretched hand and pressed his lips tightly together. Koors took the paper and scribbled a letter of resignation as his eyes moistened.

Lord Marshal Grefon took the paper and read it. He signed the paper making the retirement official. "If I may make a suggestion to both of you," Grefon remarked. "If you were to recommend your own replacement right now, Cortain Koors, word could be spread that you had done so. The real purpose of this meeting need not be known, only the outcome. Both of you will look better for it."

With tears in his eyes, Koors went through the motions of recommending Marak as his replacement and then asked leave from the Lord Marshal. After Koors left, Grefon turned on Marak.

"You, soldier, have some rather strange ideas on how an army should be run," declared Grefon. "I know you spoke from the heart and were ready to take your punishment, so I believe what you said is what you truly feel. It is by sheer luck only that you have escaped the ax man. Personally, I am glad. Officially, you are on notice for aberrant behavior. Next time bring your grievance to me before taking action of your own."

Grefon walked over to the wall map and motioned for Marak to join him. "This is Fardale," instructed the Lord Marshal. "You know from the meeting days of the problems they have. Your Corte is being assigned to Fardale on temporary terms. Your men are more experienced than Marshal Garouk's and,

frankly, I think he is underestimating the Chula. He has orders to wait for your arrival before baiting the cat people. I want you and your men to scout out this Sitari Valley and be the bait he is seeking."

"Do we have any information on these cat people?" Marak asked.

"Nothing over what you have already heard," clarified Grefon. "I am giving you two weeks to get your Corte in shape. You are going to need a new Squad Leader to replace yourself. Give me suggestions when you have them."

"The man for the job is Botal, Lord Marshal," Marak said unhesitatingly.

"Very well," Grefon agreed. "Botal is a good choice. You may inform him, but I will make the formal announcement when your promotion and Koors' retirement is announced. Send him to see me this morning. That's all I have for you, Cortain. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Lord Marshal," smiled Marak for the first time since the meeting began. "I will endeavor to raise the proficiency of my Corte to the highest levels."

Grefon nodded and Marak turned to leave when the Lord Marshal suddenly spoke. "Cortain, your first orders are to spend the morning with your mother. You may tell your Squad Leaders of your promotion. I suspect that Rybak will not be surprised and his squad should have taken over for Tagoro's by now."

"Thank you, Lord Marshal!" exclaimed Cortain Marak. "Why do you say Rybak will not be surprised? I have always taken him for Koors' man."

"You have much to learn, Cortain," chuckled the Lord Marshal. "Rybak's kind has been around as long as there has been an army. Rybak is nobody's man but his own. You should watch him closely."

Marak felt on top of the world as he pranced out of the mansion and headed for the barren field. The Lord Marshal was correct about Rybak. The man didn't blink an eye at hearing that Marak was now his Cortain and that he had been ordered to spend the morning with his mother.

As a Cortain, Marak was free to speak with his mother or any slave, but the Lord Marshal's orders were still necessary in order to relieve her of her duties and for Marak to be able to take her away from the overseers. He gently led her across the creek to his personal practice field and started the encounter with a kiss and a long embrace. Glenda's tears rolled down her cheeks as Marak told her about his promotion. For hours the two talked and hugged, as they had not been able to for years.

After a couple of hours into the encounter a smiling, but sheepish, Tagoro entered the field with a picnic basket for the two of them and a message from Lord Marshal Grefon. The message stated that Lord Marshal was amending his orders and Marak should utilize the entire day with his mother. Enclosed in the pouch with the message was a single lituk blossom for Glenda. The day passed quickly for both Marak and Glenda and it was long dark by the time Marak escorted his mother to the slave compound. Marak went immediately to his keepbox and withdrew his father's necklace and put it on. He remembered his vow to her, which he made the night he sneaked into the slave compound, as he fell asleep.

* * * *

Marshal Garouk looked out the window at the rising sun as Lord Lashendo paced the floor of his study.

"I don't care what they said in Lituk Valley," the Lord ranted. "They treated us like we did not know how to handle our own affairs. You said your plan was solid. Why should we wait for some young pups

from Lord Marshal Grefon to come help us out of our problem?"

Marshal Garouk shook his head. "The only reason to wait is because they told us to wait," he stated.

"That is not entirely correct," whirled Lord Lashendo. "The Lord Marshal ordered us not to make any further attempts at clearing Sitari Valley. Although I bristle at being given orders by anyone other than Lord Ridak himself, the fact is that nobody told us not to spring our trap. The Lord Marshal said he planned on sending men to reinforce us, but he did not say that we had to sit and wait for them."

"What exactly are you proposing?" questioned Marshal Garouk.

"If Lord Marshal Grefon's men come in here and your plan works," explained Lord Lashendo, "they will get all of the credit and we will look like incompetent fools. If, for some reason, it doesn't work, it will be because our plan was incomplete or foolhardy. It is a situation in which we cannot win. The only way we come out of this looking good is to solve our own problems and you already have the plan in place. I say we institute the plan immediately. Send a squad into the Sitari Valley. No lumbermen, no wagons, just a squad of soldiers."

"A lone squad will be wiped out," protested Marshal Garouk. "If we wait for Grefon's men, we can send them into Sitari Valley and not worry about the losses. Who cares about the credit for success or failure? The end result is that we have the valley and the cat people are dead."

"I care about the credit!" screamed Lord Lashendo. "I can not just apply for another job as Lord of somebody else's estate. If I look bad here, Lord Ridak will replace me. He will replace you, too, in case that makes a difference to you. The point is that you have presented me with a plan for solving our problem. I am still the Lord of Fardale and I have accepted your plan. I am ordering you to institute your plan without delay. There is no more discussion needed on this matter. When you balance a suggestion from Lord Marshal Grefon against my direct order, you really do not have a choice. Get the defenses set up and choose a squad to go out to Sitari Valley."

"As you command, My Lord," Marshal Garouk recited.

The Marshal of Fardale walked out of the study trying to choose which squad he would send to their death. Getting the defenses ready would occupy his mind and keep the rest of the men from brooding on what they all knew would happen to the squad sent out. He had actually proposed the reinforcements to Lord Marshal Grefon in the hopes that the Lituk Valley men would not be aware of what waited for them when they left for the Valley of Death, as the Fardale men had been calling it.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 5 Learning

The squad of yellow and green clad soldiers rode hesitantly into the Sitari Valley. The Squad Leader discussed the available options with his men and they decided to try to draw the Chula out after them instead of sacrificing their lives for the Situ Clan. Their orders were to arouse the Chula into attacking and no one mentioned the need for the squad to commit suicide. The Squad Leader decided to sneak into the heart of the valley and then raise a ruckus as they galloped back out. Hopefully, the Chula would be incensed enough to chase them all the way home to the Fardale mansion.

The members of the squad were jumpy and every sound caused someone to shout or cry out. The Squad Leader cursed under his breath as he gave up hope of sneaking into the heart of the valley. The musty smell typical of a fargi forest hung over the trail and even the horses seemed to sense death all around the party. The Squad Leader decided that the center of the valley was too great a risk to take and set his new goal at the small clearing where the last group of men had been slaughtered. From the description given to him by Togi, the one lumberman to escape the massacre, the Squad Leader knew he was close and they could turn around soon. He hoped the cat people would chase them as he had no stomach for making this trip again.

The Squad Leader saw the slight notches on the fargi trees and looped around the clearing so his men would have room to turn around. As soon as he started heading back out of the clearing, he saw them. Six nearly naked men with spears sat upon tigers blocking the trail back home. The Squad Leader could not imagine how they had gotten into position to block the trail without anyone hearing them. They were only about six horse lengths behind the last rider in the column. The horses reacted to the presence of the tigers and tried to back away. The other soldiers finally saw the barbarians and their large cats and started cursing.

The Squad Leader looked frantically left and right for more of the Chula and breathed a sigh of relief that they were only facing six of them. He waited for his men to regain control of their horses as the barbarians just sat there. It suddenly dawned on the Squad Leader that there might be more Chula on the way and he must act quickly if he was going to survive. He shouted the order to charge at the top of his lungs and started forward to give his men the start they needed. He immediately halted his own horse as the first of his men went racing past him towards the barbarians.

Smug that he did not need to lead the charge, the Squad Leader watched in horror and fascination as several twirling masses of light lanced towards his group from the bushes. The masses of light flattened and transformed into blue-white blades twirling around a center. Even as he watched his lead men going down with barbarian spears in their chests, he saw the whirling blades slice through their first victim. The blades sliced cleanly through clothing, flesh and bones. Even then, the blades continued on to their next victim. More of the twirling blades came flying out of the bushes surrounding the clearing. The last thing the Squad Leader saw was the growing pile of body fragments, both human and equine, as the whirling blades slashed into his chest.

* * * *

A shout rang out from the main gate to the Fardale estate and Marshal Garouk ran out of the mansion with Lord Lashendo close behind. They stood on the porch and watched a lone horse trot through the gate and head for the stables. Marshal Garouk needed no confirmation of the meaning of the returning horse. The animal's back was covered in blood, the blood of its rider, no doubt.

"It is started, then," Marshal Garouk declared. "Now we shall wait."

"When do you think they will attack?" queried Lord Lashendo.

"I doubt they have the ability to strike quickly," mused the Marshal. "It is close to sundown now. I think we should expect them in the morning if they can get it together that quickly. If not tomorrow, certainly the next day."

"Well, I shall be sure to find my bed early this evening then," chuckled Lord Lashendo. "I do not want to miss this massacre."

"That is an excellent idea," remarked Marshal Garouk. "I will check our defenses one more time and leave an order for an early wake up."

A pair of kittens wandered through the main gate of Fardale while everyone's attention was focused on the bloody horse. They didn't wander aimlessly, nor did they walk across the open stretch of ground before the mansion. Instead, they hugged the wall single file until they reached an old shed and found entry through a damaged wall board. They climbed among the garden implements until they found a high shelf with sufficient room to lie down. There they curled up and went to sleep.

The sun set and gradually more and more of the Situ Clan went to sleep. After a time, the only yellow and green warriors who were awake were those on guard duty. The kittens rose and stretched lazily. Casually, they leaped down from the perch and split up, each taking a different path into the dark night.

One kitten walked around the mansion, avoiding the guards at the doors, until he found the smell of the kitchen and leaped up onto the window ledge. The kitchen was dark and empty and the cat jumped easily to the floor. With an extremely small flash of light, the kitten transformed into a young Chula shaman. The shaman looked around the kitchen and plucked a large meat cleaver from the worktable and padded to the doorway that led to the rest of the mansion. Silently, keeping in the dark, the shaman made his way out into the hallway and began his search for the Lord of the estate.

The shaman wasted no time examining rooms where the doors were placed close together. The Lord's suite was obvious as there was no other door nearby at all. He gently turned the handle of the door and stepped into the empty sitting room. After a few moments, he found Lord Lashendo asleep in his bed. The shaman did not require the meat cleaver for his task as he had other methods of killing his foe, but the warning had promised that those who sent the next invaders would have their blood flowing upon the ground.

Ever since the Chula had given their warning, scouts, in the form of cats, had kept watch on the estate. The Chula knew who the Lord was and the location of the officers with plumes who commanded the soldiers to invade the Sitari Valley. This shaman's other targets included the officer with plumes of green and yellow and the officers with the green plumes who lived in a separate building. The other shaman would make the rounds of the barracks, eliminating all of the officers with yellow plumes.

The shaman quickly located Marshal Garouk and left the meat cleaver behind as he once again took the form of a kitten. Dashing through the corridors and hallways as quickly as his four little feet could carry him, the shaman leaped out of the kitchen window and made his way to the building of the green plumed officers. This time the shaman used one of the officer's swords to decapitate his victims. Having completed his task, the shaman paused and wondered if his partner needed any assistance. He gazed out the window and saw her in the form of a kitten heading back towards the shed. Quickly, he transformed himself and followed her.

At the shed, the kittens transformed themselves into tigers and leaped to the top of the shed. Together they let out a mighty roar and waited for the guards to notice them before leaping onto the wall and jumping down to make their escape. Part of their mission for this night was to make sure the Situ knew who had struck this night and why. Having accomplished their mission, the tigers ran towards the Sitari Valley to report to the others.

The guards noticed the tigers, but their eagerness to chase the tigers into the dark night was nonexistent. One of the guards ran to inform the Marshal about the sighting and ran into the first bit of evidence that the Fardale branch of the Situ Clan was without leadership. Within moments every member of the Situ Clan in Fardale who was capable of waking was awake.

* * * *

Marak's mother, Glenda, stood at the edge of the orchard, apart from the gathered soldiers, watching the ceremony. Lord Marshal Grefon had given the order which excused her from the fields for the short duration needed to attend. Marak stood on the porch in front of Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon to receive the yellow plume, which marked him a Cortain in the Situ Army. The presentation was short but very solemn. Attaining the rank of Cortain was considered a lifetime achievement and all of the soldiers not on duty were in attendance. Lord Marshal Grefon had already announced the retirement of Cortain Koors with a glowing speech for his long years of service.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Glenda returned to her duties in the field. Marak had arranged to meet with her each evening and would not otherwise interfere with her duties. After congratulations from the soldiers in attendance, Cortain Marak called a meeting of his new Corte. Botal had been quietly elevated to the position of Squad Leader in the Lord Marshal's office and had taken over command of Marak's old squad. Squad Leader Tagoro had long followed Marak's lead in training his men and the purpose of the meeting was to bring Squad Leader Rybak into line with Marak's philosophy.

The Lord Marshal was correct in his assessment of Rybak and the Squad Leader welcomed his new Cortain with open arms. Any thought of allegiance to Koors was dead and Rybak was falling over himself to praise the leadership skills of his new superior. Rybak's men seemed genuinely interested in learning and training with the other two squads and the meeting was over quickly. Marak's Corte was officially off the duty roster for the next two weeks in order to provide him with time to work the three squads into a cohesive unit. Marak ordered Tagoro to lead the three squads to their private practice field and begin integrating Rybak's squad into the training sessions.

Marak left his men to their practice and went to Lord Marshal Grefon's study.

"Yes, Cortain Marak," greeted the Lord Marshal. "What is it?"

"Lord Marshal," Marak began, "I was wondering if you have any books about the Chula. As long as we have two weeks to prepare, I would like to read about their fighting style and weapons, if that is possible."

The Lord Marshal laid his papers on the desk and gave Marak an appraising gaze. He never had another Cortain show such initiative about studying an enemy's methods and wondered if Marak was just trying to impress the Lord Marshal with his industriousness. Grefon stood and walked to one of his bookcases. He quickly selected a volume entitled *Indigenous Peoples of Khadora* and handed it to the young Cortain. It was a volume he had read himself, just recently, and he planned to take the wind out of the young Cortain's sails. If Marak thought that Grefon would show him any favoritism because of this trickery, he would soon find out the opposite was true. Lord Marshal Grefon had been dealing with soldiers like Rybak for many years and he did not need to have another one.

"Try this, Cortain," smiled the Lord Marshal. "It does not contain much on the Chula, but I think you will find it interesting. Make sure you return it before you leave for Fardale."

"Thank you, Lord Marshal," replied Marak. "I will make sure it is returned quickly."

Grefon smiled as the young Cortain walked out of the study. He had no doubt that the book would be returned soon, unopened. Cortain Marak would soon find out that buttering a Lord Marshal was not as easy as it looked.

Marak took the book and went to the private practice field. He sat under a sevemor tree and watched the men practice for a while and then started reading. As the Lord Marshal predicted, he found the book fascinating. There was not a great deal written about the Chula and Marak quickly devoured that section.

The one part of the text about the Chula, which really struck him, was a suspicion that the cat people used a type of magic that was unknown in Khadora. The author made light of these suspicions, but Marak wondered if there could be other types of magic.

Instead of putting the book aside, he found himself reading about other indigenous peoples including the bird people who were called Omungans and lived beyond the Kalatung Mountains, which were not far south of Stony Brook. The very fact that his eight-pointed metal disc weapon was called an Omunga Star made him read the section. The author explained why the Omungans were called bird people. They did not resemble birds in any way, in fact, they appeared quite human. What was different about them was the fact that they rode on extremely tall and fast birds. The author claimed that the birds were actually faster than a horse and stood about ten feet tall. The Omungan warriors used a variety of weapons, but it was the Omunga Star, which was thrown even while mounted, that captured Marak's interest. He completed the section on the Omungans, paying particular attention to the odd weapons they used and their tactics.

Marak looked up briefly at the practicing warriors and was pleased with the way Rybak's men were fitting in. He turned back to his book and started reading about the Fakarans, or spider people, who lived beyond the Fortung Mountains far to the East. Less was known about the Fakarans than either the Chula or Omungans and the section was short. Marak did read that the Fakarans used two-handed swords with a double edge, carried in sheaths on their backs and wondered if that was where the sword he purchased had come from. There was a reference to stories about the Fakarans getting the name 'spider people' from the fact that they rode on large spiders, but the author openly laughed at the stories. The author claimed to have visited the Fakarans and not seen any evidence of large spiders.

Again Marak looked up and noticed that the men were quitting for the day. He gazed at the sinking sun and couldn't believe that he had been reading all day. The men waved and nodded to him as they filed past to grab a quick dip in the icy cold stream. Marak picked up his book and decided to read just a bit more while the men bathed.

The next section was bizarre. It dealt with a people called Motangans, who live on a large island across the sea. Most of the commentary was tales from seaman who had either visited the island or sailed close to it. The Motangans were reportedly large apes with the intelligence of men. Marak read about grandiose ape cities and a civilization more advanced than Khadora. The Cortain wondered why, if the stories were true, the Motangans had never sailed to Khadora. If their civilization were so advanced, certainly they would have appeared on the shores and in the ports by now.

Squad Leader Tagoro interrupted Marak's reading and Marak realized it was almost dark already.

"If you are planning to read through the night," chuckled Tagoro, "I should bring you a lantern. A runner brought an invitation for you to dine with the Lord Marshal tonight. You had better hurry if you don't want to be late."

Marak rose and stretched his muscles. "Thanks, Tagoro," smiled Marak. "I guess I lost track of time. I thought my eyes were getting tired, but it was probably the failing light."

Marak explained some of what he had read as he and Tagoro walked back to the barracks. Marak put on a clean uniform and hurried to the mansion. A servant was waiting for him at the door and led him to a small, informal dining room. As Marak was shown in, the Lord Marshal rose and greeted him.

"Ah, our new Cortain. Welcome," greeted Grefon. "I see you brought the book back already. You must be a fast reader."

"Thank you, Lord Marshal," answered Marak. "I guess I just have a problem putting a book down."

Marak handed the book back to the Lord Marshal and Grefon grinned. He did not normally dine with a Cortain, not even a new one, but he was determined to put Marak's attitude right before this buttering went any further.

"So, are you an expert on the Chula now?" quizzed Grefon as the servants brought out bowls of soup with large noodles and thin slices of clova meat.

"Certainly not on what is in this book," chuckled Marak. "The sections on the other indigenous peoples were actually more interesting."

Grefon shook his head as he savored the spicy broth. Marak could dance around all evening with vague generalities about the book, but the Lord Marshal was not going to allow it. "I think it rather strange that the Chula have even bothered to cross the Kalatung Mountains to harass us, don't you?"

Marak found that the large noodles were actually packed with wasooki and almost choked on one when the Lord Marshal spoke. "Actually, Lord Marshal," gasped Marak, "I didn't read anything about the Chula crossing the mountains. The author indicates that they have always resided here. You are probably thinking about the Omunga. They ride large birds and live on the other side of the Kalatungs."

"How do you know about the Omunga?" queried Grefon skeptically.

"They are described in the book you lent me," replied the confused Cortain. "I hope I did not transgress, but I couldn't put the book down and read the whole thing."

"Preposterous!" exclaimed the Lord Marshal. "Look, Marak, I do not like my soldiers to butter up to me. You may be a slippery devil, but there is no need to continue this charade. I know why you borrowed the book and it will not work. I do treat my men with respect, but I also treat them equally. You will gain no favor with your ploys, so do not attempt them again."

Marak put down his spoon and stood. "Lord Marshal," he stated indignantly, "I appreciate the loan of your book and the invitation to dinner, but I will not have my word questioned. If you take my desire to know as much as I can about an enemy who may soon slaughter my men as an attempt to butter you, then you have certainly taken the wrong meaning to my actions. How much is your favor worth to a dead man? You are sending me and my men into Sitari Valley as bait. No one expects us to return, but I will do everything in my power to make sure my men do return. If the information can be found in a book or through the interrogation of a prisoner, what does it matter, as long as the needed information is gained?"

The Lord Marshal stared at his new Cortain in wonderment. If Marak was putting on a show, it was certainly a good one. Grefon decided that he needed to know what made Marak different from his other men.

"Sit," ordered the Lord Marshal. "I have invited you to dinner, not a brawl. Tell me what you have read in the book I lent you."

Marak sat and recited the stories he had read as the servants brought plates of rare wasooki in clam

sauce and some type of grilled fish that Marak savored. By the time the servants were serving a lituk-flavored frozen cream, Marak had finished his recitation. Grefon smiled freely as he listened. He had read the volume himself only days ago when he was informed of the massacre in the Sitari Valley. The Cortain's retention and understanding were excellent. Grefon began to wonder who the boy's father might have been. The type of initiative the Cortain had shown was more typical of a Lord's son than the son of a soil mage. Very few soldiers thought beyond the next chance to get to a tavern and that included most officers.

"I owe you an apology, Cortain," offered the Lord Marshal. "I am so used to dealing with a different mentality that at times I forget people can be eager to learn new things. My library is available to you at all times. Make use of it. I do want you to know my feelings about Sitari Valley, though. I wanted you promoted to Cortain specifically to send you into Sitari Valley. My goal is not to send a Corte to its death. Your men are the best trained men we have and I think it is because you have managed to push them beyond what is normally taught."

Grefon paused to finish his frozen cream and Marak took the opportunity to do the same. This was not the type of meal that was offered in the barracks and Marak didn't want to miss a taste of it.

"I know about your private practice area," smiled the Lord Marshal, "and I approve. Your men are the only chance we have of sending a Corte into Sitari Valley and getting them back out again. That is why you were promoted. I want your men to survive as much as you do and I will do whatever I can to make that happen. If you want to equip your men with those nasty-looking double-edged swords, do it. Do whatever you must to bring them back alive."

It was Marak's turn to stare in amazement. The Lord Marshal must have known about everything he thought he was keeping secret. He remembered seeing Rybak come out of Grefon's study during the meeting days and began to wonder if the Lord Marshal had used Rybak to force Koors to retire. Rybak may very well be the Lord Marshal's eyes and ears in Marak's Corte, even now. It appeared that the author of *Indigenous Peoples of Khadora* was not the only teacher Marak had this day and Marak intended to be a good student. He would learn by observing the Lord Marshal's moves as much as he would from reading a book.

"I will, Lord Marshal," declared Cortain Marak. "My men will survive or I will not return. If you have any more books on the Chula, I would appreciate seeing them."

Grefon nodded grimly and led Marak to his study. Cortain Marak was amazed at the variety of reading material Grefon had accumulated. Not all of it was limited to warfare and military strategies. The Lord Marshal had just as good a selection of tomes pertaining to finance, commodities and ancestry. Loaded with three volumes, Marak returned to his barracks to read.

For hours Marak plowed through the books searching for references on the Chula. There were many passages that mentioned the cat people, but very little solid information. It appeared that the Chula kept pretty much to themselves and did not make any attempt to integrate into Khadoran society. His mind kept flashing back to the stories told by the Fardale soldiers, trying to pick up anything that he had heard which might be more revealing now that he had some knowledge of the people who were being described. Nothing came to him and Marak fell asleep with a book in his lap.

Marak dreamed of battles between giant tigers and massive spiders where the human riders were the spoils for the insidious creatures. The battles raged on until there were no humans and the creature fought each other just to be victorious. The scene changed to boatloads of intelligent apes landing on some distant shore and savagely conquering the bird people. The apes soon learned to control the tall, running

birds and mounted them just like the Omungans before them. Thousands of huge birds trampled over the Kalatung Mountains bearing ferocious apes and began attacking the Situ. One of the apes rode right into Marak's barracks while the men were asleep and began killing and eating them. One of his men, he was not sure which one, managed to hurl an Omunga star into the ape's forehead and killed it. The men, thinking they were safe, went back to bed. The huge riderless bird suddenly went around and pecked the remaining men to death. The bird broke down the door to Marak's room and started pecking at him. He fought back, but the bird kept pecking. Finally, he reached out and seized the bird's beak and heard it issue a human scream.

"Don't kill me," shouted the mansion servant. "I'm just trying to deliver a message."

Marak sat up and stared at the frightened servant. "I'm sorry," Marak groggily replied. "I was dreaming. What message? What time is it?"

"I don't know the time," shuddered the servant, "but the Lord Marshal wants you in the Meeting Chamber right away. He is in there with Lord Ridak and neither one of them is the least bit happy. They're yelling and ranting and the Lord Marshal says that you better get there before I even tell you you're wanted."

Marak could not make sense out of the servant's nervous speech, but one thing came through clearly. The two most powerful people in the Situ Clan wanted him and he was not going to keep them waiting.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 6

Fardale Plans

Cortain Marak quickly dressed and ran to the Meeting Chamber. He heard Lord Ridak's shouting voice while he was still in the entry foyer. Entering the Meeting Chamber, he saw Lord Ridak, Lord Marshal Grefon, and a Squad Leader whom he recognized from the feast as being from Fardale.

Lord Marshal Grefon waved Marak over to where the Situ Lord and the Squad Leader were talking. "We have a problem, Cortain Marak," greeted the Lord Marshal.

"A problem?," screamed Lord Ridak. "We have a disaster. The Situ will be ruined. We are not talking about missing the deadlines for a few contracts anymore. We are about to violate every contract that has been made with Lord Lashendo. Nobody will ever trade with us again. We will have to devote our entire energies to becoming self-sufficient instead of expanding."

The Lord Marshal had given up on trying to calm Lord Ridak and gently led Cortain Marak to a corner to explain the problem. "Lord Lashendo decided he did not need to wait for your Corte," explained the Lord Marshal. "He sent a squad into the Sitari Valley to bait the Chula yesterday. Last night one of the guards saw two tigers leaving the walled compound and went to report the incident to Marshal Garouk. He found the Marshal beheaded and a meat cleaver lying beside him. The guard sounded the alarm and went to awaken Lord Lashendo. He, too, was beheaded."

Grefon shook his head and glanced back at Lord Ridak, who was finally lowering his voice. "All of the Lectains and all of the Cortains were also murdered in their sleep. Squad Leader Zorkil here is the highest-ranking man left in the Army of Fardale. None of the domestic staff were harmed, not even

Bursar Tachora. No other Army personnel were harmed."

"It would appear that the Chula have a liberal definition of leader," noted Marak. "Have they made any attempts to attack Fardale since the murders?"

Lord Ridak and Squad Leader Zorkil walked over to join the Lord Marshal's discussion. Lord Ridak's color was returning to normal rather than the bright red he was sporting when Marak walked in.

"Not at the time I left the estate," offered Squad Leader Zorkil. "The men have their defenses ready, but if they can get in unseen and wipe out our leaders, I don't see how any defenses are going to work. Most of the men were ready to escort me to Lituk Valley."

"They are scared and leaderless," interrupted Lord Marshal Grefon. "We must replace Lord Lashendo immediately and reinforce their garrison. Cortain, I am afraid you will not have the luxury of the two weeks I promised you. Your Corte will leave for Fardale as soon as Lord Ridak selects the new Lord of Fardale."

"And who will I find to send?" stormed Lord Ridak. "Lord Wernik of Stony Brook? Perhaps Lord Caruko of River's Bend? Everyone knows about the troubles Lord Lashendo has been having with the Chula and the threat they made. They are not fools. When they find out I am looking for a replacement for Lord Lashendo, they will figure it out."

"You are the Lord of the Situ," informed the Lord Marshal. "You have only to point your finger and say, 'go'. None of them will refuse you. Choose whom you think is best and Cortain Marak will escort him with an entire Corte in the morning."

"Oh, they'll go all right," snipped Lord Ridak, "but what will they do when they get there? They will devote the entire resources of Fardale to protecting themselves while their own estates are deteriorating."

"Send one of the Seneschals," suggested Marak. "They have experience in leading people and are familiar with the running of an estate."

"Perhaps Bursar Tachora can take over," offered Lord Marshal Grefon.

"Bursar Tachora is an incompetent fool," worried Lord Ridak. "He was good in his day, but that was twenty years ago. The old fool can barely find his bed and the old codger chose a woman as his assistant. Imagine, a woman to handle finances! That shows what a waste the man is."

"Squad Leader Zorkil," ordered the Lord Marshal, "you have reported and there is no reason for you to remain during the discussion. You will find a bed in the first barracks on your right as you leave the mansion. Get some sleep because you will be returning with Cortain Marak in the morning."

Zorkil saluted and shuffled out of the Meeting Chamber. "There is no need for him to hear our discussions on the weakness of Fardale leaders," stated Grefon. "Perhaps Marak has the right thought. Choose the best Seneschal and make him a Lord. He will be so thrilled about the promotion that he will strive to his best."

"A Seneschal's best is not good enough," retorted Lord Ridak. "Just making sure that Fardale has a Lord is not adequate. The contracts for grain must be filled or the Situ will face ruin. Lord Lashendo had enough problems fulfilling the contracts before this affair with the Chula. Now the workers will be looking over their shoulders while they plant the grain. Nothing will be accomplished by putting a stooge in

control of Fardale. I need a solution which will accomplish a miracle."

"Well," sighed Grefon, "whatever the solution is, Cortain Marak must lead his men out there in the morning. I will not have Fardale under the control of a Squad Leader because that is no control at all. Regardless of the Vows of Service, you will have men leaving their posts if there is not a speedy response from Lituk Valley."

"Of course," agreed Lord Ridak. "Send them in the morning. When I find my candidate for Lord of Fardale we will send another Corte to escort the Lord and reinforce them."

"They are not lacking for men," reminded Grefon, "only leaders. Sending another Corte is a waste of men and I do not wish to deplete our own strength that much. Cortain Marak should leave in the morning, but he should also be escorting the new Lord of Fardale."

"I cannot just conjure a Lord out of thin air!" Lord Ridak yelled. "I must have time to find the right candidate, if there is such a person. I will give the new Lord absolute powers concerning Fardale, but I must find someone who can salvage those contracts. Wernik and Caruko are the only men I can think of, but they already know too much about the Chula to be immune to the fear and Wernik is probably too old, anyway."

"Meeting the contracts will require that the Chula be conquered," reminded the Lord Marshal. "Lord Lashendo was quite clear that they needed the additional land if they had any chance of fulfilling the contracts."

"I thought your new Cortain, here, was going to take care of the Chula," barked Lord Ridak. "We just need someone who can motivate the workers and Army to perform better than they ever have."

"Cortain Marak was going to be the bait sent into Sitari Valley," clarified Grefon. "His Corte is not going to invade the Chula and defeat them alone and the Fardale contingent will be reticent to return to Sitari Valley and leave the estate unprotected."

Marak watched the verbal sparring between his two superiors and tried to detach himself from it. He understood the problems Lord Ridak faced, but he could not believe that the Situ did not have at least a score of eligible candidates for the position. If all that was required was motivating the workers...

"I have a suggestion," interrupted Cortain Marak.

Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon halted their conversation and turned to the young Cortain.

"Send my Corte out to Fardale in the morning," Marak began. "I will go as your acting Lord and motivate the Army and workers to do whatever is necessary to bring in the crop on time."

"You insolent little clova," berated Lord Ridak. "You are barely untied from your mother and you think you can be a Lord? Do you think you will just walk in and wave your sword and all of the work will get done? I don't think you are even ready to wear your new yellow plume, never mind solving the world's problems."

"Leave us," ordered the Lord Marshal. "Go wait for me in my study."

Marak saluted and marched out of the Meeting Chamber. Lord Ridak turned his fury on Grefon. "You pushed me to promote that young insolent child," scolded Lord Ridak. "I think the best use of him is in

the fields with his lying mother."

"Perhaps," smiled Grefon, "the young insolent Cortain is exactly what we need."

Lord Ridak looked at his Lord Marshal with puzzlement in his eyes. "I have seen that look of yours before, Grefon. I have the feeling you are about to solve our problems by sacrificing a young clova to the slaughter pens."

"A possibility," admitted the smiling Lord Marshal. "Marak does have a certain ability to motivate people and we are sending him to Fardale anyway. Let him go as the new Lord of Fardale. His Corte will bring stability to the Army and the people will feel that we are deeply concerned. He will attempt to bring in the crops and fail miserably, but ... we will appeal to the contract holders and blame the problem on his youth. If they are not satisfied, we will offer to have the Lord of Fardale executed for his miserable performance. This will show the contract holders the sincerity of the Situ and our desire to see them properly served."

"That just might work," smiled Lord Ridak, "especially if everyone thinks that he is like a son to me. I won't have to actually state that, but everyone will get the idea."

"At the very least," added Grefon, "his short term as Lord will bring stability to Fardale and provide you with the time you need to find the right replacement."

"This demonstrates one of the reasons I like you," chuckled Lord Ridak. "You do have a knack for turning problems into opportunities. Have the papers drawn up immediately. We will have a ceremony at dawn and send our new Lord off to Fardale."

"I will draw the papers up myself," grinned Grefon. "Why don't you get some sleep? I'll personally bring the papers to your suite when they are ready."

Lord Ridak smiled and nodded as he pranced off to bed, warm with the feeling of a successful answer to a puzzling riddle. Lord Marshal Grefon strode to his study and found Marak reading a book. Marak jumped to attention as Grefon entered.

"I am sorry if I overstepped my position, Lord Marshal," Marak said quickly.

"Nonsense, Cortain," smiled Grefon. "Your suggestion was a good one. Lord Ridak sometimes has trouble seeing the potential of our young officers. I discussed your idea with the Lord after you left and he agrees with me. In the morning you shall be the new Lord of Fardale. I am to draw up the papers right now."

"Are you serious?" gasped Marak. "Lord Ridak is really going to make me the acting Lord?"

"Not acting," laughed Grefon. "You will be the new young Lord of Fardale with all of the rights and privileges due a Lord. As soon as I finish this document I will present it to Lord Ridak and you will be the Lord. The ceremony will be rushed, of course, because you must get to Fardale as soon as possible."

Marak's head spun with giddiness. He had felt such a fool the moment those words had left his lips and Lord Ridak's tirade shortly after didn't help. He thought he was going to be reprimanded and stripped of his yellow plume, but now he was going to be a Lord with unlimited powers.

"Of course," smiled Marak, "don't forget to put in the clause about absolute powers."

Lord Marshal Grefon stopped writing and stared at the young Cortain. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Lord Ridak declared that the new Lord of Fardale would have absolute powers," stated Marak. "I think they will be necessary to ensure that the crops come in."

"I don't think that is necessary," declared the Lord Marshal. "The normal powers of a Lord should be sufficient."

"To neglect the absolute powers clause would be to damage Lord Ridak's word," reminded Marak. "He has made the statement and it is for him to refute it."

The Lord Marshal clenched his fist and broke his writing instrument. He knew he had to either put the clause in or scrap his plan for Marak to be Lord. He was amazed that Marak would insist on the wording of his proclamation. The young man should be thrilled to even be considered for such a position and, yet, he was gambling on getting everything he wanted.

"If you push too far," snapped Grefon, "you may end up with nothing."

"Would it be too far to ask that my mother accompany me to Fardale?" asked Marak.

"Yes!" shouted Grefon. "It would. I will insert your clause of absolute rule because it really means little and the Lord will be sleepy when he signs it, but I will add nothing else. All absolute rule gives you is the opportunity to make Fardale issue Vows of Service to you as their Lord, instead of to Lord Ridak. You must still maintain your Vows of Service to Lord Ridak, so its only purpose is to infuriate Lord Ridak, but I will add it. Now leave me. Go get some sleep and I will send someone to awaken you for the ceremony."

Lord Marshal Grefon watched in anger as Marak left his study. His plan would work equally well with any young officer, but Lord Ridak was already sold on the idea of sending Marak and he did not want to chance a change of the Lord's mind. He quickly finished the pronouncement and walked to the Lord's suite. Lord Ridak was already asleep as he thought he would be, but he did not mind being awakened to sign the document. Lord Ridak did not even glance at the pronouncement and Grefon was happy he did not have to argue about the added clause.

Grefon smiled as he walked back to his suite. All things considered, everything had worked out rather well. Grefon desired to retire to Fardale and retirement as a Lord would be grand. He would have jumped at the chance brought on by Lord Lashendo's death, except for his knowledge that the contracts for this year could not be filled. He had planned to propose himself as a replacement for the Lord of Fardale, but only after Lashendo failed on the contracts. Lord Lashendo's death nearly destroyed those dreams. If Lord Ridak had an able replacement ready, Grefon's hopes would have been dashed. Pleased with the events of the evening, Lord Marshal Grefon reclined on the couch in his study to catch a few winks before the quickly approaching dawn.

Grefon felt like he had just closed his eyes when a servant woke him. He rubbed his eyes and looked out of the window to the gray sky of morning. He also saw Marak talking with his mother. No doubt he wanted his mother to witness the ceremony this morning. He quickly scribbled a note to the Seneschal, pleased that this was the last time he would have to interfere in her work schedule. Unlike that old fool, Koors, Grefon had learned long ago that small things, which cost you nothing, often gained the undying gratitude of the masses. Marak would have his mother watching him be raised to the status of Lord of

Fardale. The ceremony would be short and she would be back in the fields before Marak was on his horse.

Grefon grabbed the pronouncement and the note to the Seneschal and left his study. He hailed a servant and sent his note on its way. Another servant ran to inform the guards to awaken the camp for the ceremony. The Lord Marshal moved to the small dining room in which he shared breakfast with Lord Ridak every morning. Lord Ridak was in a happy mood although he had little sleep. Grefon was even happier. By fall, Lord Marshal Grefon would be Lord Grefon of Fardale and heir to the Situ Clan.

Breakfast was a hurried affair of goose eggs and fried bread. Lord Ridak always had two glasses of lituk juice with breakfast, his and Grefon's. Grefon absolutely hated the bitter juice and would be happy if he never saw another glass of it as long as he lived. Grefon rose to hurry to the porch, knowing his leaving the table would hurry Lord Ridak along.

The soldiers of the Situ Army stood in formation to hear whatever pronouncement the Lord intended to make this morning. Grefon smiled when he saw the horses for Marak's Corte already waiting for the ceremony to be over. The Lord Marshal read the first paragraph of the pronouncement, which contained the appointment. The whole document was never read at these pronouncement ceremonies and they were always drafted with the first paragraph containing the address that was to be given.

Grefon smiled at the mass of amazed faces before him. Evidently, Marak had been a good little boy and had not even told his old friend, Tagoro. Marak walked up to Lord Ridak and the Lord embraced him like a favorite son. There were audible gasps from the ranks and the Lord Marshal could not help chuckling. Lord Ridak handed one copy of the pronouncement to the new Lord of Fardale and kissed him on both cheeks. The soldiers sang out the traditional recital appropriate for a new Lord of the Situ Clan and the ceremony was over.

The Lord Marshal made sure that he was the first to congratulate the new Lord of Fardale and then released him to the waiting throng. Marak was amazed at the enthusiastic response from his fellow soldiers, but his footsteps led to his mother. He wanted to say goodbye to her just before he left. On his way to his mother, Marak caught a glimpse of the Lord Marshal talking to Squad Leader Rybak and knew what they were discussing. Rybak was to be Grefon's spy at Fardale and would gleefully report Marak's failures back to the Lord Marshal.

Marak made it to his mother as Tagoro instructed the Corte soldiers to mount up. Marak hugged his mother and promised to get her out of the fields somehow. He wasn't sure whether his mother's tears were tears of joy or sorrow as he kissed her goodbye. Her hand reached into his shirt and felt for the necklace and a smile broke out on her lips as she touched it.

"Do well, my son, the Lord," Glenda cried. "Treat your people well and they will do anything for you. Remember that."

"I will remember those words on your lips until you join me in Fardale," Marak promised. "And I will heed them forever. Goodbye, Mother."

Marak tore himself away and joined his Corte. He gazed back at her as he rode along the path to the main gate. Once outside the main gate, Marak called for Squad Leader Zorkil to join him. Zorkil was not sure how to react to Marak. The man was Zorkil's military superior and his new Lord.

"Lord Marak," Squad Leader Zorkil asked, "how do I address you? Do I salute because you are my Certain or do I bow because you are My Lord?"

"Squad Leader Zorkil," laughed Marak, "I do not know, either. I would presume that when we are in military formation, you should treat me as your Cortain and when we are not, you will treat me as your Lord. Things are going to be difficult for all of us, Zorkil. How you address me will seem unimportant when we start to tackle the problems of Fardale. We have a long journey ahead of us and I want you to tell me as much as you can about Fardale. Do not try to color the people or events, but give me the barest truth, particularly where the news is bad. I mean to make Fardale a shining example for the whole nation of Khadora and I am going to need all of the help I can get."

"As you wish, My Lord," replied Zorkil. "If I may ask, are you Lord Ridak's son? He seems to display a great deal of affection for you."

"No," answered Marak, "I barely know the man. I suspect our good Lord expects us to fail in Fardale. I do not know how he expects to profit from our failure, but I do know that he is going to be sorely disappointed because I do not intend to fail."

"I do not know where to begin," sighed Zorkil. "Fardale was not in good shape before the Chula started to cause trouble. Our yield from the fields gets less every season. That is why Lord Lashendo was trying to clear the Sitari Valley. People are unhappy about many things. The Seneschal and Bursar are both very old. Seneschal Pito doesn't leave his room on most days, so there is no one to watch the mansion help. Bursar Tachora was known as a brilliant man, but even Lord Ridak knows that he is long past time for pasture. Most of the Army is old and cast off from other estates. I often think that Fardale is like a retirement estate for the other Lords. They send someone who is no longer efficient to Fardale and it counts as a contribution to the Situ Clan, the same as if they sent young men to serve in Lord Ridak's Army."

"You are not that old," Marak observed. "How did you come to Fardale?"

"I married a woman whose father is a smith at Fardale," answered Zorkil. "She did not want to leave her father and I had no family ties at River's Bend, so I requested a move to Fardale and got it. I think the older men of the Army may have trouble accepting you as our Cortain or Lord. That may very well be your first obstacle. The men may feel that their first allegiance is to Lord Ridak and then to the Lord of Fardale. If Lord Ridak is expecting you to fail, they may help him. The Chula will be another major problem. The Army will use your young age as a reason to refuse to follow you back to Sitari Valley. Your age will not really have anything to do with it. They are afraid to go back there and I do not blame them. If an enemy can sneak into a well-guarded camp and kill all of the officers, you do not want to face them in their own forest. Every group who has tried is dead."

"I admire you for exposing your fears to me," stated Marak. "Why do you trust me when you do not know me?"

"I don't know, My Lord," answered Zorkil. "Perhaps a lot of small things. I saw the way you handled yourself last night and compare it to the way Lord Ridak handled himself. I saw the way your men felt truly happy for you this morning and the way your slave mother was loved by her son. Also, the way you are talking to me now indicates that you really want to help the people of Fardale. You could have accepted what Lord Ridak told you to do, but, instead, you want to understand what the problems are. Everything about you indicates that you are going to make life better in Fardale if you can accomplish it. That does not mean you will succeed, but you have my willful help just for the asking."

"Thank you," accepted Marak. "A miracle starts with believing and you are my first. I am going to need your help to influence the others to actively work to solve our problems. Now, start with the very basics."

I want to know each of the crops grown in Fardale, how they are doing this year, why they are performing the way they are. Then I want to know about the organization of the Army. Every name that you can think of and that person's characteristics. I will not remember them all, but I will absorb as much as I can."

Squad Leader Zorkil spent the entire journey chattering in Marak's ear. At certain times, Marak took notes and scribbled suggestions for actions to be taken later. Towards the end of the journey Marak began to sense the immense proportions of the task ahead of him. Lord Lashendo was an experienced ruler and he had failed to overcome Fardale's problems, but Marak did not lose hope. He was committed to making Fardale work better than anyone had ever envisioned.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 7

Young Lord

As Marak's Corte got close to Fardale, he called the column to a halt.

"Squad Leaders," Marak shouted, "assemble your men before me."

Marak waited while the Squad Leaders formed their men. Everyone was curious about the reason for the stop when they were so close to Fardale. Marak waited patiently for the group to settle down.

"Situ warriors," Marak began, "we are soon to enter Fardale, our new home. We are going to be facing some difficult times in the next few months and it is important that we start out on the right foot. Every one of you heard Lord Ridak's pronouncement when we left Lituk Valley. The same cannot be said for our friends in Fardale. I expect all of you to form a solid backbone of support for me during these troubled times. I need your support."

Marak scanned the faces before him and wondered if anyone would raise objections. Most, he knew, would readily embrace his plans for Fardale, but even one objection could mean trouble.

"Although you were read part of the pronouncement," Marak continued, "you did not hear it all. Lord Ridak has granted me, Lord Marak, absolute authority over Fardale, of which you are now a part. To facilitate my absolute authority, each of you will now offer your Vows of Service to Lord Marak. These Vows will replace your Vows of Service to Lord Ridak."

Squad Leader Rybak saluted and stepped forward. "Cortain," addressed Rybak, "my men have given Vows of Service to Lord Ridak. We are Situ warriors and we can not replace the Vows we have already uttered."

Marak smiled when he saw confusion on the faces of Rybak's men. Rybak had not discussed this protest with his men. He undoubtedly had prior knowledge of the clause from talking with Lord Marshal Grefon, but he did not expect Marak to move so quickly.

"Would you violate your Vows to Lord Ridak, Squad Leader Rybak?" posed Marak.

"Never!" exclaimed Squad Leader Rybak. "That is my point. We can not take your Vows because it would violate our Vows to Lord Ridak."

"Did Lord Ridak assign you to my command and order you to obey me in Fardale?" Marak asked.

"Yes, Cortain, of course, but..."

"Did Lord Ridak make me Lord Marak of Fardale and specifically state that I should exercise absolute authority over everyone under my command?" Marak pushed.

"Well, yes, Cortain, but..." Rybak said nervously.

"And doesn't absolute authority mean that all previous Vows of my subjects are negated, with the knowledge of the Lord issuing the pronouncement?" smiled Lord Marak.

Rybak knew about the clause in the pronouncement, but he never considered that it also applied to him. He considered himself part of the command from Lituk Valley, not a member of the Fardale contingent, but even as a soldier on temporary assignment, he was subject to the rule of the Lord of the estate he was stationed at. Marak was correct. The only way that Rybak could get out of issuing the Vows of Service to Marak was to violate the Vows to Lord Ridak and that would mean slavery.

"Yes, Lord Marak," bowed Rybak. "I am grateful for your explanation."

Rybak moved back into position with his men and Lord Marak scanned the assembly looking for any other signs of dissent. Seeing none, he began the procedure of allowing each man to step forward and recite his Vows of Service to Lord Marak. The whole ceremony was over in minutes and Marak addressed them again.

"The Vows you have just taken," stated Marak, "put you in my service until such time as I deem fit to release you. Every person in Fardale must take these same Vows. Until everyone has, none of you are permitted to speak of them. When we arrive I will go directly to the Meeting Chamber. You men will begin the process of bringing everyone into the Meeting Chamber to recite their Vows. No one will be overlooked and no one is to have foreknowledge of the nature of the Vows. Squad Leader Rybak and his men will remain in the Meeting Chamber with me. Squad Leader Tagoro will lead people into the Chamber and Squad Leader Botal will manage those exiting from the Chamber. Squad Leader Zorkil, you will be in charge of the mansion staff. I want to process them first and then the Army. Are there any questions?"

There were no questions and the Corte mounted their horses and continued the journey to Fardale. Marak continued pressing Zorkil for information about Fardale. Zorkil noted that he was impressed with Lord Marak's absolute authority and further declared that there would be few objections from the people at Fardale. Fardale was fairly isolated from the rest of the Situ Clan and their allegiance had always been to their Lord. Most of the people would not know Lord Ridak if they tripped over him.

Within an hour after taking their Vows, the Corte sighted Fardale and Fardale saw them. A rider came out to greet them and, at Marak's insistence, Squad Leader Zorkil did the talking. He introduced Marak as Cortain Marak and requested that the Meeting Chamber be made available immediately. He stated that Marak wanted to see every person on the estate and would address everyone as a group only after that. The rider pressed for more information, but Zorkil sent him off to prepare for the Cortain's visit.

As soon as the Corte arrived, Marak headed straight for the Meeting Chamber with Rybak's men right behind him. As Marak was getting situated, Zorkil appeared with Seneschal Pito and Bursar Tachora. They were rather amused that young Marak was their new Lord, but were cooperative and recited their

Vows. Marak then sent them off to obtain lists of all Fardale personnel. Seneschal Pito would have the lists of slaves and unpaid workers, while Bursar Tachora held the pay records for everyone else. Both men returned with their lists and remained for the rest of the Vows. Considering the large number of people on the Fardale estate, the ceremony was finished quickly. Zorkil helped Tagoro round up everyone after he finished with the household staff and Botal roped off a huge area behind the mansion so the kitchen staff could provide refreshments in a festive atmosphere.

Squad Leader Zorkil was correct and only a handful of people made any sign of resistance. Marak made sure their names were noted as potential problems. By the time all of the Vows of Service had been given Fardale was in the midst of a party. Marak walked out to address them and had to wait several minutes to get their attention.

"Fellow Clan members," began Lord Marak, "I want to thank you for making my assumption to Lord of Fardale painless. I know many of you are curious about who I am and what my reign will be like. I am not going to give you some grand story and a bunch of meaningless promises. The next few months are going to be hard on all of us. Our number one priority will be to bring in the crops and deliver on our contracts. I know you have been through some terrifying times and the Chula occupy your thoughts every day, but the Chula are a problem for the Army. I have plans for dealing with the Chula. What we need are plans for dealing with the crops. I am not familiar with Fardale or its crops, so I have to depend on you to inform me of what is needed."

Marak paused to sip a glass of water and survey the crowd. Everyone was listening intently, but in every group there were people shaking their heads. "I have some new rules for Fardale that some will think foolish, but I assure you that anyone interfering with these new rules will be dealt with harshly. Anyone with a suggestion for improving crop yield will have the right to speak with any superior about it. That means that a field worker, even a slave, who has a thought about how to improve our crop yields should present their idea. If they think their suggestion is valid and is not being acted upon, they may take the suggestion to a higher authority without any recriminations. That includes bringing the matter to my attention. If anyone is in any way punished for this, I will deal with those responsible harshly."

Marak used his glass of water as an excuse to survey the crowd again. Nodding heads were starting to appear to negate the shaking heads so Marak knew he was heading in the right direction.

"This policy," he continued, "will extend to suggestions in all estate matters, but crop yield must be given the highest priority. This new policy does not excuse anyone from discussing their suggestions with their immediate superiors first. Only go further if your suggestion is not being acted upon. For those of you in the Army, we are going to need new Lectains and new Cortains. Every member of the Army is allowed to make nominations for these positions. No one may nominate themselves and each person may only make a nomination for one Cortain and One Lectain. The nominations shall be written and signed and can be left sealed with the Seneschal."

This got the soldiers excited and Marak had to wait for the noise level to drop before proceeding. "I am also instituting a Council of Advisors for Fardale," resumed Lord Marak. "This Council will be made up of one representative from the Army, one from each of the guilds, the Seneschal, the Bursar, one from the household staff, one from the laborers, one from the mages and one from the slaves. Nominations will be the same as those mentioned for the Army, but will be delivered instead to Bursar Tachora."

Most of the crowd were nodding now and Marak concluded that most of the people, like people everywhere, were frustrated by what they saw as inept rulers with the workers not having any chance to offer suggestions. Marak observed that people tend to put more effort into their work when they feel they have some hand in directing it and the people of Fardale proved to be no exception. There was barely a

shaking head to be seen. Squad Leader Botal's idea about creating a festival atmosphere for the talk was also helpful. Marak saw many smiling faces with the froth of ale on their lips.

"Now, to celebrate the arrival of your new Lord," smiled Marak, "work for the rest of the day is cancelled."

Marak stepped down from the impromptu stand, which Botal had erected for him, and returned to the Meeting Chamber to think about what he would do next. Squad Leader Zorkil entered a few moments later.

"What is the matter, Lord Marak?" Zorkil queried. "The people seem happier than I have seen them in a long time. Why are you not happy as well?"

Marak looked up at his smiling Squad Leader. "There is much to do," sighed Marak. "I am not sure where I should begin or even whether I have the necessary skills to take care of these people. I pushed my way into this position so I would be able to help the people. Well, I have the position now and I don't know what to do."

Zorkil selected a chair next to Marak and sat down. "Already you have done more for the people's spirits than Lord Lashendo ever did. So, you don't know what to do next. Is that a major problem? You will tackle the problems one at a time like you would attack a superior force of men. You can not kill them all at once, so you select one to kill and hope the others don't kill you while you are whittling down their numbers."

Marak looked queerly at his new Squad Leader. "You see running this estate as a battle?" quizzed Marak.

"Why not?" Zorkil persisted. "All of life is a battle. You may use different tools and methods to accomplish your goals, but the strategy is the same. Put your first efforts toward the problem which will hurt you the most, use your resources wisely, take advantage of your people's special skills, and never underestimate your opponent."

"You make it sound so easy, Marak chuckled. "If it were a battle, I would feel more at home in dealing with it."

"So I have heard," smiled Zorkil. "Do not look so amazed. Even in Fardale, tales of Squad Leader Marak's skill in battle have been heard. That is one of the reasons the Army didn't object to taking the Vows. They respect a warrior, even a relatively young one, over some Seneschal or Bursar who has been given a promotion. They will test you to see what you are made of but, until you fail, they will support you."

"You carry surprising wisdom for a Squad Leader," complimented Marak. "Is that why you were chosen over the other Squad Leaders to report to Lord Ridak?"

"I have grown up with the Army," Zorkil replied. "My father was a Lectain before he died. He taught me much about what motivates men. I do not understand your hesitation. Surely, you do not think that leadership is reserved for the babes of Lords. You have proven your own leadership skills already. Now you must do so again, but in a different arena. Consider everyone in Fardale as part of your Squad and attack."

"Careful, Zorkil," laughed Marak, "I may appoint you the Clan Philosopher. But you are right. I am

letting the overwhelming odds distract me. Tell Seneschal Pito and Bursar Tachora that I want complete reports on the status of Fardale on my desk in the morning. Where is my desk, by the way?"

"I took the liberty of having your things taken to the Lord's Suite," smiled Zorkil. "I will show it to you when you are ready."

"Not tonight," frowned Lord Marak. "Have my horse prepared instead. I am going to take care of the Chula tonight."

"Tonight?" gasped Zorkil. "You can't mean tonight. I tried to spur you into action, but this is not sane. Your men will be weary from the long ride and the others have already had too much ale. You can not attack the Chula tonight."

"As you said, Zorkil," nodded Marak, "take care of your biggest problem first. You are right and I will not wait any longer. Until the Chula are removed as a distraction, we can not move on to our other problems."

"Very well, Lord Marak," Zorkil sighed. "I will be among the men going with you. How many do you wish?"

"None," declared Marak, "I am going alone. I have a secret weapon to use on the Chula and it is something they will never expect."

Squad Leader Zorkil stared in astonishment at his new young Lord. "As a Situ warrior, I will not permit my Lord to go into battle alone. If you do not allow me to accompany you, I will follow anyway. You may punish me for breaking my Vows of Service, but you will not be able to do so until we return."

"I admire your bravery, Squad Leader Zorkil," remarked Lord Marak, "but this is something which does not require your help. At the best, your presence will add nothing to the solution. At worst, you will have died for nothing. This is something I must do alone. Your place is here to keep things running smoothly and to hide the fact that I am gone. Your skills will also be needed here if I do not return."

"Return from where?" asked Squad Leader Tagoro as he quietly stepped into the Meeting Chamber.

"I should think a new Lord would get more respect than I get from the two of you," admonished Marak. "Nobody would dare to talk to Lord Ridak this way."

"You are not Lord Ridak," stated Tagoro. "You are someone we care about. He is just a figurehead. If you are planning on running away from your responsibilities, I am sure Zorkil will help me tie you to your desk."

"He is planning on using some secret weapon on the Chula," blurted Zorkil. "He thinks we will let him go off alone and face those savages."

Marak glared at Zorkil for disclosing his mission, but Tagoro broke out laughing. "Well, his secret weapon is one that only he has the skill to use," chuckled Tagoro.

Turning more serious, Squad Leader Tagoro sat down. "Are you sure this is a good idea so soon?" he asked. "Your weapon has failed you before and there are many people whose lives depend on you."

"I am sure," nodded Lord Marak. "I can not sleep knowing the Chula might attack at any moment and

slaughter these people needlessly. I am going alone. If Zorkil even goes near a horse, I want you to lock him up."

Tagoro had seen his friend's look of determination before and simply nodded. Zorkil looked back and forth between the two men from Lituk valley and shook his head. "I will have your horse made ready," Zorkil sighed as he left the room.

* * * *

Rykoma, Grand Shaman of the Kywara, walked through the trees to the hut of Tmundo, Leader of the Kywara Tribe. He pushed aside the deerskin flap and inhaled the scent of venison as he entered.

"A scout has returned from Fardale," Rykoma announced without preamble. "The Situ have sent more men to reinforce their garrison, one of them wears a yellow plume."

Tmundo waved his family out of the hut. Tmundo's wife gathered the two small boys, who had been wrestling over a snake's rattle, and ushered them outside.

"One yellow plume is all that they sent?" questioned Tmundo. "Perhaps they will cause no further difficulties for us."

"You do not believe that any more than I do," stated Rykoma. "It will take time for them to rebuild their leadership, but they will not cease their expansion into our lands. I say we should attack now and end the need to keep watch on them."

"Is our watch that costly in manpower that we cannot watch a while longer?" posed Tmundo. "These flatlanders are no real threat to the Kywara. Look how easily we removed their leaders. The troops were probably sent in to stop the others from running away and abandoning the settlement."

"Our scout reports there were signs of celebration," remarked Rykoma. "This does not sound like a bunch of frightened deer to me. I think they hail a new warrior who has promised to lead them to victory. We should strike tonight while they are still deep in their ale."

Tmundo tore off a piece of venison and savored it in his mouth. "Perhaps we should keep a close eye on the new arrivals to see what they are planning," Tmundo suggested. "When is your next scout due?"

"Soon," Rykoma answered as he took the liberty of retrieving a piece of venison for himself. His eyes grew wider as he waved the deer meat before his large nose. The senses of a shaman were acute and Rykoma could actually taste the venison before it entered his mouth.

"I have dispatched another pair of scouts to replace those on watch," Rykoma continued as he licked his lips. "They should have arrived at Fardale already and we will have an updated report shortly."

"Then we will wait a while longer before making the decision," declared Tmundo. "If we kill all of the flatlanders at Fardale, some other Lord will take over and our troubles will continue. We must make them afraid to approach us, only then will we live in peace."

"If they are not afraid after witnessing our magic," Rykoma persisted, "we will never scare them off. The only smart flatlander is a dead flatlander."

"You forget," reminded Tmundo, "that the only flatlanders who have witnessed your magic are dead flatlanders. We will wait for the next report."

The Leader of the Kywara and the Grand Shaman did not have long to wait. The flap disappeared momentarily and the scout entered.

"Forgive the intrusion," the scout bowed. "I was told the Grand Shaman was here and my report is urgent."

Tmundo nodded to Rykoma and the Grand Shaman told the scout to report.

"Yellow plume has left the mansion and is riding this way, but without his plume," reported the scout. "He is alone and left secretively. I saw only one flatlander who saw him leave. The rest continue to party and appear incapable of defending Fardale."

"Why would a yellow plume travel alone and unescorted?" puzzled Tmundo.

"I can only speculate," replied the scout. "We tried to remain within the walls, but some of the soldiers threw stones at us and it was not safe, even as kittens. Yellow plume gave a speech at the party. I believe he is their new Lord, but he is very young, perhaps he is the son of a Lord. He stated that he had plans for the Chula and the crowd was very pleased with his statement. Perhaps he plans to spy on us and find out if we have any weaknesses."

"Why would a Lord do this himself?" questioned Tmundo. "Certainly he would find some other soldier to risk his neck."

"I do not know," admitted the scout, "but this Lord is a warrior. I can see it in the way he walks and holds himself, like a wary wolf waiting to leap at the first sign of trouble. Whatever he plans, we will know soon. He was riding straight for Sitari Valley and his horse was not walking. I ran all the way to make sure you had this information before he arrived."

"Very well," decided Tmundo. "Let us provide a welcoming committee for this new Lord. Maybe he thinks to challenge me in personal combat. Rykoma, have your shaman prepare for battle."

* * * *

Lord Marak slowed as he reached the entrance to Sitari Valley. Looking around under the dark sky, Marak could see nothing. He did not like the feeling of entering the valley alone in the dark, but the matter could not be put off any longer. He hoped the author of the book that he read was as knowledgeable about the Chula as he claimed to be. Marak rode slowly along the animal path and kept his eyes straight ahead. He wouldn't be able to see anything in the dark woods to either side of himself and roving eyes would only distract from his other senses. Marak kept his ears perked for any sounds and let his nose adjust to the scent of the fargi trees. The forest smelled musty in areas, like piles of wet leaves from last fall. Other areas smelled fresh as if spring was just taking hold of the valley.

The forest got darker as he quietly rode deeper into the valley. The path was relatively clear of leaves and the horse caused only a minor disturbance. Still, he dismounted and tied the horse to a tree and continued along the path on foot. His legs trembled slightly when he heard a sound off to his right. The noise did not sound like a person sneaking up on him, but rather like an animal stalking its prey. Marak thought back to the descriptions of the tigers that the Fardale men said their woodsman saw. He silently berated himself for losing concentration and steeled himself for attack as he continued along the path.

Marak came to a small clearing and could just make out the scar of a woodsman's ax on one of the trees. He stopped walking and slowly turned in a circle. There were very slight noises all around him, but

nothing he could identify. His eyes picked up several shapes moving on the path he had just walked along and tried to follow them, but they merged with the darkness of the forest and Marak returned to concentrating on his other senses.

Lord Marak was startled by a brilliant flash of light in the woods and his head turned instinctively towards it, even as his body was dropping to the ground. The flash was a strange blue-white light and Marak watched in slow motion as the projectile soared towards him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 8

Kywara

Lord Marak hit the ground and hugged it as the blue-white light exploded above him, creating eerie shadows and illuminating the warriors and tigers surrounding him. Marak glanced up at the brilliant globe of light spinning high over his head and quickly clamped his eyes shut. Still, the light sparkled through his eyelids and Marak slowly and cautiously pushed himself off the ground.

With steady hands, Marak slowly and obviously removed his sword from its sheath and laid it gently on the ground. Next he removed the two belt knives and placed them on the ground. Looking towards the path at the Chula sitting calmly but attentively on their tigers, Marak removed the two throwing knives from their sheaths attached to his forearms and gently laid them next to the sword. Finally, while scanning the hillside from which the light had come, Marak removed two Omunga Stars from his broad Situ belt and placed them on the ground.

Marak distinctly heard a chuckle when he had finished discarding his weapons and stood with his arms outstretched and his palms facing upward.

With a loud voice that reverberated through the woods, Marak called out. "I have not come to invade you by myself. I have come to talk about an ending to the bloodshed. Will your Tribe Leader hear my words or is the senseless killing to continue?"

A tall, muscular Chula, clad only in a breechcloth, materialized out of the trees and walked up to Marak. The Chula warrior quickly ran his hands over Marak and stood back, waving to some unseen person.

Another Chula warrior stepped out of the bushes and gathered up Marak's weapons. Marak was impressed by the stealthiness of the Chula warriors. The first Chula warrior gently reached up and pulled Marak's headband down over the Lord's eyes, effectively blindfolding him.

Marak felt firm hands take hold of each of his arms and start leading him up the hillside. His two escorts managed to make the trip uneventful and fifteen minutes later Marak was set down on the floor near a fire.

"You may remove your blindfold," offered a deep, solid voice.

Marak pushed his headband back up onto his forehead and glanced around the hut. Across from him was a muscular, powerful looking man dressed in deerskin. Marak assumed the voice belonged to the deerskin-clad man because the person sitting next to him looked like he should purr, rather than speak in a deep voice. The second person resembled a man with pronounced cat-like features. He had a full mane of hair, which Marak could picture as being appropriate on a lion. His eyes were narrow slits and long

whiskers extended from above his split lips.

"Thank you," stated Marak. "I am Lord Marak of Fardale and I have come to talk about peace between our peoples."

"Peace?" purred the cat man. "Do you call sneaking, heavily armed, onto our lands in the dark of night a proper prelude to peace?"

"If the people of Fardale knew I was coming here," explained Marak, "they would have tried to come with me. You would have taken it for another invasion and we would not be sitting here talking. Yes. I call it a proper prelude to peace talks."

"Well spoken," smiled the deerskin-clad man. "I am Tmundo, Leader of the Kywara Tribe. With us is Rykoma, our Grand Shaman. We shall honor your bravery in coming here with talk of peace. It is well that you did not bring another army onto our lands."

"It is my desire to never bring another army onto your lands," declared Marak. "It is also my intention to make sure that the Kywara never sneak into Fardale and murder my people again."

"Murder?" cried Rykoma. "Your people were warned of the consequences of invading the Sitari Valley before they came. Our people only delivered what we promised."

"If that is true," questioned Marak, "how can I make sure that it does not happen again?"

"If that is true?" scolded Rykoma. "If that is true? Do you doubt the word of the Kywara?"

Tmundo gently laid his hand on Rykoma's arm and the shaman fell silent. "The Kywara are known for the truth of their word," Tmundo stated softly. "Not only the literal truth, like the flatlanders, but the spirit of the truth, as well. If I give my word that no flatlanders will be harmed by Kywara inside Fardale, you may trust it with my life."

"I will accept your words as truth," conceded Marak, "but I do not seek your life. I could order my people to stay out of the Sitari Valley, but I would not guarantee their performance with my life. I would guarantee it with the forfeited lives of any offenders, though."

"So, you fear a lack of control over the people of Fardale," Tmundo pointed out. "You appear to be wise and honest. Does this mean that you will order your people to stay out of the valley?"

"I will so order," Lord Marak offered, "if you give your word about Fardale in return."

"Before I do so," hesitated Tmundo, "I want to know more about you and Fardale. I know that you have brought fresh soldiers to Fardale with you. Why have they come?"

"I was scheduled to lead them here in two weeks' time to assist Lord Lashendo in defeating you," admitted Marak. "The men I have brought with me are the men of my Corte. I was a Cortain when we heard of the murders and our departure was moved up to leave Lituk Valley immediately."

"So, you admit that the soldiers were sent here to destroy us?" interrupted Rykoma.

"I admit that those were the orders I was to follow before we heard of the murders," continued Marak. "Things have changed since then and I am now in a position to redirect their efforts."

"I am confused," Tmundo said. "You are a minor officer in the Situ Army. You had orders to assist Lord Lashendo in destroying us. Now you show up as Lord Lashendo's replacement, with the same troops, and you expect us to believe that we are in no danger of attack?"

"Yes," declared Lord Marak. "My men and myself have no reason to wish you harm. We follow orders and those orders were to assist Lord Lashendo with his military operation. Lord Lashendo is dead and no longer in control of Fardale. I am Lord of Fardale and the soldiers will follow my orders. I do not wish war with the Kywara. I also do not wish to send my men back to serve under Lord Ridak. They will stay in Fardale."

"You are very young to be a Lord," observed Rykoma. "Is Lord Ridak your father, or are you the son of another Situ Lord?"

"No," answered Lord Marak. "I am the son of a slave who serves Lord Ridak. Before you ask how I became Lord of Fardale, I will explain it for you. Lord Lashendo wanted to clear Sitari Valley to gain more land to increase his amount of harvestable crops. Without an increase in the amount of crops, Lord Lashendo would not be able to deliver on contracts he has already made. Your murder of Lord Lashendo did not alter the problem for the Situ Clan, but it did alter the available replacements for his position. I do not know how my selection will help the Situ Clan if I fail, but Lord Ridak thinks there is some way it will help. Basically, they allowed me to be Lord because they didn't want one of themselves to fail, but I do not intend to fail."

"How, then, will you succeed?" asked Tmundo. "You face the same problems that Lord Lashendo faced, plus there will be no comforting support from Lituk Valley. Is there not more reason for you to seek control of Sitari Valley than Lord Lashendo?"

"I can not tell you how I will succeed," admitted Marak, "but I can tell you that invading Sitari Valley will not be the solution. I am a warrior and I respect what I have seen of your warriors. It would be foolish of me to waste my men by fighting over a valley that would have little yield this year. If I am able to make my contracts for this year, I can reduce the amount for next year and not require any more tillable land. My problem is getting a large enough harvest this year. The extra men I brought with me may end up tilling the fields."

"Your words ring with logic," smiled Tmundo. "Will you be replaced as Lord of Fardale if you succeed?"

"Not if I can help it," Marak said. "I have bargained for a pronouncement that makes me the absolute ruler of Fardale. Lord Ridak cannot order my people to do something other than what I want. If he removes me, he cannot force me to relinquish my people. He can enslave me for defying him, but there is nothing he can do to regain the Vows of my people short of killing me."

"It would appear that Lord Ridak is playing with a tiger when he thought he had hold of a housecat," interrupted Rykoma. "Why should the Kywara make the same mistake?"

"Do not the Kywara have better things to do than watch over their neighbors?" retorted Marak. "Lord Ridak has enslaved my mother and perhaps killed my father. His treatment of people is indecent. I wanted this position as Lord of Fardale to prove that things can work without enslaving people. Do you think I would unburden my people just to turn them back over to Lord Ridak when all of the problems are solved?"

"Do you really intend to free your slaves?" asked Tmundo.

"I have many changes planned for Fardale," declared Lord Marak. "Freeing the slaves is but one. I have read that the Chula are capable of powerful magic. Is this true?"

Rykoma and Tmundo exchanged uneasy glances. "What would knowledge of Kywara magic have to do with Fardale?" questioned Rykoma.

"Situ magic is limited and not properly used," answered Marak. "I said my mother was a slave to Lord Ridak. What I did not say is that she is also a soil mage. I spent my younger years in her care and met other mages of air, sun, and water. I believe that the four types can be combined into more powerful magic. I have read that the Chula have different types of magic that have been long forgotten to those whom you call the flatlanders. If your shaman could instruct my mages to increase the fertility of my fields, my yield would increase without the need for more land."

"Kywara magic is never revealed to flatlanders," Rykoma replied promptly. "If we were able to help your mages, we would not do so."

Tmundo sensed the disappointment on Marak's face, but said nothing about it. "Was your father also a mage?" the Kywara Leader asked.

"I do not know," Marak answered. "I was young when we were separated and I do not remember him. All I have of him is my necklace and my mother's memories. She never mentioned him having magical capabilities."

Rykoma reached over and plucked the necklace from beneath Marak's shirt so he could see it. "It is very handsome," the Grand Shaman appraised as he gently pushed it back into place. "It is sad to lose your parents at a young age."

If Lord Ridak comes with soldiers to forcibly retake Fardale," asked Tmundo, "will your soldiers fight for you?"

"Lord Ridak will try many other methods of regaining control before he sends his soldiers," Marak remarked. "I will have plenty of notice. I believe that by then the answer will be yes. I have much work to do to win the hearts of my people first."

Tmundo smiled as he realized that he was taking a liking to the young warrior-turned-Lord. "I think your courage and devotion to your ideals will win their hearts soon enough. I am willing to make a pact with Fardale. This is the offer of my pact. If the people of Fardale will recognize Sitari Valley as the property of the Kywara and respect our boundaries, the Kywara will refrain from any attacks on Fardale ... as long as Lord Marak reigns."

"But what if ...", started Marak. "You are a wise man, Leader Tmundo. You not only seek peace with your neighbor, but seek to keep a peaceful neighbor. I am indebted to you on behalf of the Fardale people. It would please me to visit with you again, if that is permissible."

"You are welcome to visit, Lord Marak," extended Tmundo. "May I assume that you also offer such an invitation?"

Marak hesitated before answering. "I would welcome such a visit," he finally replied. "I have a favor to ask in addition to our pact. When I return to Fardale I would like to be escorted by two of your warriors

riding their beasts. It will help my people to accept you as friends and neighbors if they can see you as people instead of nightmares."

"A wise request," smiled Tmundo. "As long as we can keep your beast from shying, I think it will do us both well. I would like to send some of my people, unannounced, to look at your fields. Perhaps there is some advice we can give you. Will such a journey be safe for my people?"

"I will make it so," guaranteed Marak. "Still, it would be best if they were small groups at first."

"No more than one or two," grinned Tmundo, "and they will leave their beasts behind. Now, we should all need time for sleep. I will have someone show you a place to sleep and in the morning two of my men will escort you to Fardale."

Marak nodded his thanks and was led to an empty hut where he found his weapons waiting for him. A simple mat adorned the floor of the hut with fresh blankets folded alongside. Marak stripped off his uniform and covered himself with a blanket. The mat was very comfortable and the Lord of Fardale swiftly drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Squad Leader Zorkil opened the door and shook Tagoro. Tagoro rose up on one elbow and squinted at the rising sun. "What is it Zorkil? Has he returned?"

"No," worried Zorkil. "He has been gone all night and I am worried about him. The Chula are barbarians and will torture him if he is caught. I wish you would tell me what his secret weapon is."

Tagoro laughed as he scooped water from the basin to his face and wiped it dry with a towel. "You never asked what his secret weapon was, Zorkil," chuckled Tagoro. "Lord Marak's secret weapon is his mouth. He believes that many problems can be solved just by talking about them. The thought is quite foreign in Khadora and Marak and I have always joked about it. He has gone to talk with the Chula. That is why he did not want any company. They will not consider one man a threat, but two or three would be treated differently."

"So that is why he was so adamant about me staying behind," understood Zorkil. "But I do not think the Chula will stop to talk with him. They will kill him before he gets one word out."

"Do not underestimate your new Lord," laughed Tagoro. "Marak has many strange ideas, but they make sense after he has a chance to explain them. If anyone can talk the Chula into being peaceful, he will succeed. Still, I share your apprehensions. He should have been back many hours ago."

"Do you think we should go looking for him?" asked Zorkil.

"No," answered Tagoro. "This is his realm and we must allow him to rule as he sees fit. It is his neck that is in the noose. Let's go wait by the gate so he doesn't get punctured by one of your archers."

Tagoro and Zorkil were waiting half an hour when a shout rang out from the wall. Men scurried to their places to prepare for the attack and Tagoro raced to the top of the wall and followed the lookout's pointing finger. In the distance he saw three figures approaching, one on horseback and two riding tigers. Tagoro strained his eyes to pick out Marak on the horse and when he finally verified that it was the Lord of Fardale, he shouted out an order to stand down.

Marak waved as he got closer and the Fardale soldiers stared in disbelief. Marak halted short of bow

range and dismounted. Tagoro and Zorkil were already on their way out to greet their Lord and Marak turned to them. He pressed the reins of his horse into Tagoro's outstretched hand. The Kywara warriors also dismounted and let the tigers roam free. The tigers actually appeared tame and made no effort to attack the horse, which had been skittish for the first half of the ride. Marak introduced Squad Leader Zorkil and Squad Leader Tagoro to the Kywara warriors and each of them grasped the other's forearm in the traditional welcome of Khadora.

As soon as the display was completed, the Kywara warriors called their tigers, mounted, and rode back the way they had come. Lord Marak walked with his two Squad Leaders back to the main gate as if he had just been on an outing. Marak held up a parchment as he entered the estate and shouted that Fardale was at peace with the Chula. He contemplated calling another gathering to announce the treaty, but decided that the word would spread quicker this way. He was right and word of the treaty reached the mansion even before he did.

Marak told Zorkil and Tagoro the details of his meeting as they walked to the Lord's study where Seneschal Pito was waiting with his reports. Once he reached the study, he sent the two Squad Leaders off to confirm the reports of the treaty so everyone would know it was not just a rumor. Lord Marak waved the Seneschal into the study and sat down.

"Good morning, Seneschal Pito," greeted Lord Marak. "You have the reports I requested?"

"Yes, Lord Marak," answered the gray haired man. "Is it true about a treaty with the Chula? Do you think we can trust them to honor the treaty?"

"The Kywara, to be exact," corrected Marak, "and, yes, they will honor the treaty. There is no record of the Kywara ever breaking their word." Marak did not elaborate that there were few records of the Kywara at all.

"Well, that is certainly a feather in your helmet," congratulated the Seneschal. "Will they allow us to clear the Sitari Valley?"

"Absolutely not," replied Marak. "I have no intention of clearing another valley. Our manpower is better spent getting our crops from the fields we already have."

The Seneschal nodded as he handed the reports to Lord Marak and took a seat. "I'm afraid that will leave us far short of the amount we need to fulfill our contracts."

"That is a matter which I will take up next with the Bursar," Marak declared. "Which report details the slave labor and which deals with the mages?"

Pito rifled through the pile of papers and withdrew two sets. "There is some crossover in the two groups," Pito mentioned. "Some of the mages are slaves."

Seneschal Pito sat fidgeting quietly as Lord Marak read the reports. He strained to see what Lord Marak was scribbling on the papers, but his eyesight was no longer sufficient to accomplish the task. For over an hour Pito sat in silence and Lord Marak scribbled away. Finally, Marak looked up and shoved the papers back to the Seneschal.

"I have made some notations for your consideration on these reports," stated Marak. "Read them this morning and I will be available for your questions this afternoon. The main points which I want you to act on immediately are going to be significant changes to the way Fardale has been run in the past. I

understand that we have two empty barracks as well as the barracks used by the Lectains. They are to be made ready this afternoon for the slaves. As soon as the slaves have been relocated, you will make a determination about the condition of the slave shacks. Those that can be repaired and brought up to the same condition as the laborer huts, will be repaired. Those which can not be economically repaired are to be torn down and new ones constructed."

"That will take some time, Lord Marak," replied a surprised Seneschal. "Even after we construct new buildings for the slaves, they will not remain in good condition for long. You just cannot have that many people live in a building and have it remain serviceable."

"You are quite right, Seneschal Pito," smiled Marak. "That is why you are also going to construct enough new huts to house the entire slave population according to the ratio used for the laborers. You see, Seneschal, Fardale no longer has any slaves. As of this moment, all slaves are free men and shall be housed as such."

Pito's jaw dropped as he gaped at his new Lord. "This extra work will only hamper your efforts to bring in the crop on time," stated a stunned Seneschal. "Not to mention the extra land which will be required. I don't think we will have enough workers to complete the huts by harvest time."

"Seneschal Pito," scolded Lord Marak, "we do have to work on your negative attitude. You will have one month for the huts to be completed. I have every confidence that you will succeed in the tasks I have given to you. I want to be informed when construction begins on the first hut. Assemble the slaves for me in two hours' time. I want to personally inform them of their freedom. That will be all for now."

Seneschal Pito rose shakily from his chair and gathered his papers. He gazed at Lord Marak as if he was looking at a madman, but when Marak's eyes rose to look at the departing Seneschal, he tucked the papers under his arm and scurried out. As soon as the Seneschal left the room, a small, young woman entered the study. She carried a stack of papers and lowered her slim figure to the chair, which Pito had just vacated. Marak looked up at her and smiled.

"What can I do for you?" Marak asked.

"I am here with the Bursar's reports," she answered as she slid the reports across the desk.

"And who are you?" Marak quizzed.

"I am Kasa, Bursar Tachora's assistant," the woman replied as she toyed with her short black hair. "He told me you want these reports first thing in the morning. I have been waiting for the Seneschal to leave."

"And where is Bursar Tachora?" demanded Lord Marak as he stared at the woman's green eyes which appeared to be puffy from lack of sleep.

"I do not know, My Lord," Kasa answered softly.

"Have you seen him this morning?" grilled Marak. "When did he give you these reports?"

The woman bit her lip and lowered her eyes to the desktop. "I have not seen him this morning," Lord Marak," she whispered. "I have been sitting in the corridor outside. He did not actually give me these reports, he ordered me to compile them."

"I asked for accurate reports of our contracts and financial position," prompted Marak. "Are you telling

me that you are so well informed of the financial dealings of Fardale that you are capable of compiling these reports yourself?"

"I have been doing the reports for two years, My Lord," she replied nervously. "Only the actual contract negotiations are handled by Bursar Tachora."

Marak shook his head as he looked at the reports. The financial condition of Fardale was not bad, but the prices agreed to on the grain contracts seemed fairly low to Marak. Granted, Marak was no financial wizard, but he knew the retail price of grain and it appeared as if the ratio between wholesale and retail was much greater than what he knew Lord Ridak got for lituks. He had witnessed contract negotiations while guarding the caravans.

"What do you think of the prices on these contracts, Kasa?" inquired Marak. "Isn't this price a bit low for grain?"

Marak thought the young woman would bite clear through her lip as she silently nodded. "Kasa, your Lord demands an explanation for these contracts," clarified Marak. "Why was Lord Lashendo selling grain so cheaply?"

Kasa sat silent for a moment as if deciding a weighty issue. Slowly she nodded to herself and her eyes rose to meet Lord Marak's.

"Lord Marak," sobbed Kasa, "they do not suspect that I know, but Lord Lashendo and Bursar Tachora have been selling the grain to a company owned by themselves, a company called Khadora Grain Importers. I suspect that they resell it at a higher price and pocket the difference. When I tried to investigate the company we were selling to, I was nearly sent to the fields as a laborer. Lord Lashendo, himself, told me that I was only an assistant and if I pretended to be anything else he would enslave me. As you are Lord Lashendo's replacement, I was not sure if you were involved with Bursar Tachora."

Marak shook his head as everything fell into place. Fardale was required to pay a percentage of their profits to Lord Ridak. Lord Lashendo and Bursar Tachora were skimming a healthy sum for themselves and making the profit that they had to share that much smaller. Tachora, with traditional Khadoran philosophy, wanted an assistant to push off the bulk of his work to, yet didn't want anyone to find out, so he chose a woman whom he thought wouldn't know one side of a coin from another. The only problem in his thinking was that it appeared Kasa was quite capable in the realm of finance.

"Kasa," smiled Lord Marak, "I want to know everything there is to know about Khadora Grain Importers. I want to know whom their contracts are with, how much money they have and where it is kept. I want to know if they have any other partners and, if so, who they are. If I remove you from Tachora's grasp, can you do this?"

"Yes, Lord Marak," she smiled. "I have developed contacts in the last two years that the Bursar does not know about. Not because I have been trying to deceive him, but because he just doesn't care how I handle my job."

"When Bursar Tachora asks how the meeting went," ordered Lord Marak, "you can tell him I appreciated your reporting so much that I have taken you for my personal assistant. As of now you no longer work for Bursar Tachora."

"But I don't know if he will be capable of performing the tasks, My Lord," Kasa answered. "It has been a long time since he did most of the tasks."

"Well, he shall have to relearn, Kasa," chuckled Marak. "Get that information for me as soon as possible."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 9

Neighbors

Marak yearned to get outside and get some exercise, but he continued poring over the pile of reports dealing with the condition of the Fardale estate. Crop yields had continued a steady decline since the first harvest and he found notations that indicated perhaps the soil was unsuitable for the crops being grown.

If Lord Lashendo had succeeded in obtaining the Sitari Valley, it would only have forestalled the inevitable decline of Fardale. It was possible that Lord Lashendo and Bursar Tachora knew what would happen and were planning for their own financial future when the time came to abandon Fardale.

Marak sorted through the stack of papers and withdrew the sheets that dealt with the neighboring estates. Fardale had a border with three other Clans, as well as the Chula. The Sorgan Clan was much larger than Fardale but, unlike the Situ, Watula Valley was their only estate. The Sorgan had occupied the Watula Valley for as long as there had been records of estate holdings and their crops were the same type grown in Fardale. Marak assumed that Lord Ridak had chosen Fardale for a new estate because of the financial successes enjoyed by the Sorgan Clan. While Sorgan power and influence was small in Khadora, their financial strength was enviable. The Situ Clan used to be a large purchaser of the watula grown by the Sorgan Clan, but the establishment of Fardale ended that trade. Lord Quavry was incensed by the Situ invasion of his sphere of influence and had tried to undermine Situ attempts to market their watula. Marak made a notation to contact Lord Quavry to see about bettering relations and obtaining help in determining the best crop for Fardale. If the reports about the soil being unsuited for the growing of watula were correct, Marak knew that a different crop may well thrive there.

The Litari Clan and their Glendale estate not only borders Fardale, it also shares borders with Marak's other two Khadoran neighbors, the Sorgan Clan and the Ragatha Clan. Glendale was the only estate of the Litari Clan and Lord Burdine was an old and established force in the lumber industry. Lord Burdine's holdings were vast and it was through Litari territory that the road to Forest Deep would have to travel.

There were no notations about relations between the Litari and the Sorgan and nothing to indicate that Lord Burdine had any problems with the Situ's activities in Fardale.

There were notations about Lord Burdine's feelings about the Ragatha Clan, though. The Ragatha Clan had widespread estates and Woodville was the one that dealt in wood products. The Ragatha Clan tried to use their might to expand Woodville into Glendale territory and Lord Burdine had surprised them with the ruggedness of his response. The Litari not only responded with their army, but the lumbermen also took up arms to help push the Ragatha back into Woodville. There were only three ways into Woodville and one of them crossed Litari land. The second path led through Chula country and Lord Zawbry was not fool enough to attempt that journey. After his failed attempt to grab Litari land, Lord Zawbry negotiated an agreement to allow Ragatha transit through Fardale.

Marak rustled papers until he found a copy of the agreement. He read it thoroughly and could not believe that Lord Ridak would accept such an agreement. There was no consideration specified for the use of Fardale lands by the Ragatha Clan. While the consideration could be small, he knew Lord Ridak would not execute such an agreement without some consideration. Marak made a note to see if Lord

Lashendo had been remunerated separately for the use of the land.

"Lord Marak," interrupted Bursar Tachora, "may I have a moment of your time?"

The sudden noise startled Marak and he realized he had been too engrossed in the reports. He shuffled the papers to one side and folded his hands on the desk before responding.

"Bursar Tachora," greeted Lord Marak. "Of course, come in."

"Lord Marak, I understand you have reassigned my assistant, Kasa, to your personal service," opened the Bursar. "May I inquire why?"

Marak sensed the concern, almost fear, in the Bursar's voice. "Certainly, Bursar Tachora," smiled Marak. "She is a very beautiful woman, isn't she? I am sure you are aware of how Lord Ridak feels about women dealing with financial matters and I have some pressing needs for her."

Marak could almost feel the wave of relief that washed over the Bursar. Tachora's face took on a lecherous grin and he nodded. Tachora's eyes swept over the desk and sweat started to appear on his forehead. Marak's eyes flicked to the pile of papers and saw the Ragatha agreement on the top of the pile.

"You should not be wasting your time indoors, My Lord," wheezed Tachora. "Why don't I take that pile of papers and prepare a summary for your perusal?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea," smiled Marak. "At least the part about getting outdoors. As for the papers, leave them. I must become familiar with the Fardale estate and they will help me."

"But, surely," fretted the Bursar, "you will not be able to fathom such large mounds of facts. I have a great deal of experience in taking such large quantities of information and presenting them in a concise form. This would free up a great deal of your time to get better acquainted with your people."

"You are most kind, Bursar Tachora," stated Lord Marak, "but I find it interesting to plow through these mundane reports. You will require time to make up for the loss of your assistant and you will be too busy, as it is. No, I will go through the reports myself and that settles this discussion."

Tachora patted his forehead with a handkerchief as he nodded and backed out of the study. Marak scribbled another note after his last. It reminded him to check out whether Tachora might have also have profited from the Ragatha agreement. Lord Marak rang a bell and a soldier appeared.

"No one is to enter my study when I am not here," Marak instructed the guard. "Not for any reason."

The guard saluted and Marak strode to the Meeting Chamber. The room was already full of slaves and Marak saw Kasa conversing with Seneschal Pito at the far end. The slaves were all standing around the room and all of the chairs were unoccupied, but the crowd opened wide to allow the Lord to pass through.

"The Seneschal and I were just pondering the pitfalls of eliminating slavery," Kasa informed Lord Marak.

"I am not eliminating slavery," corrected Lord Marak. "I am freeing these slaves. There is a difference. Slavery can be a useful tool as a deterrent to crime, but these people have done nothing to me to deserve

slavery. I personally abhor the very idea of slavery and I will not stand for the foul treatment and living conditions that have been considered normal until now, but I will continue a policy of using slavery as a punishment until I can come up with a better idea."

Marak turned and faced his anxious audience. The slaves had been instructed to attend the meeting without being told the purpose of it.

"Slaves of Fardale," Lord Marak addressed, "by now you should all be aware that your homes are being repaired. You will inhabit barracks until the homes are ready for your use. The work has already begun and will continue until each of you has a decent place to live. You may have heard that I am organizing a Council of Advisors and that there was to be a seat on that Council for a slave representative. That has changed. There will be no representative for the slaves because Fardale does not have any slaves. As of now, you are all free men. Whatever infraction cost you your freedom is forgiven, but I would hope that you remember it well. Slavery is not abolished in Fardale and it will still be used as a punishment."

Marak glanced around at the joyful faces, which were all trained on him. "Those of you with guild skills," continued Lord Marak, "may apply for positions with the appropriate Guild Master. The rest can apply to the Seneschal for employment opportunities. Each of you has sworn Vows of Service to me and the Vows will not be forgotten. The slave quarters that you have lived in will be repaired or rebuilt and the living conditions will be brought up to the standard of other free men. You are all welcome to volunteer your free hours to help that effort, as is true for every person in Fardale. I hope that your freedom will spur your efforts into making Fardale successful and a model to the rest of Khadora. I would love to show Khadora that our society can live without enslaving people to do our work. A lot of that success rests on your shoulders. You have the choice between using your talents to better Fardale or returning to slavery. For both our sakes, make the wise decision, be productive. Are there any questions?"

One young male slave raised his hand and was recognized by Lord Marak. "Will we be allowed to enter the Army?" he asked.

"As of now, you are no different than any other member of Fardale," smiled Marak. "You may apply for any position you wish."

The former slaves grinned and hugged each other. Many tried to reach out and touch Lord Marak as he moved to exit the Meeting Chamber. Kasa followed after Marak and Seneschal Pito just stood and shook his head.

Marak walked out the door of the mansion and basked in the sunshine. Kasa came up alongside him as he surveyed the work on the slave shacks.

"I see that work as begun already," Marak remarked. "Do you think Seneschal Pito will try to fight my edicts?"

"No," answered Kasa. "He may think that you are young and inexperienced, but he will follow your directions. Actually, I think he was bothered more by abolishing the institution of slavery than the actual freeing of Fardale's slaves. You may have eased his mind somewhat with your remarks."

"Do you think he was involved with Tachora in any financial matters?" quizzed Marak.

"I don't think so," commented Kasa. "He is old and steadfast in his ways, but he is not ambitious. He will try to do the best job he can, but I think it is time to find him an assistant."

Marak nodded as he watched men repairing a roof on one of the newer slave shacks. "What do you know about the Ragatha agreement?" queried Lord Marak.

"Not much," admitted Kasa. "Lord Lashendo had Tachora draw that up personally. I know it gives the right of passage through our lands to Lord Zawbry, but not much else."

"I want a list of anything that Tachora did personally for the last two years," ordered Marak. "I think that is the key to the pattern of siphoning off money from the estate. See what you can find."

Without waiting for a reply, Marak stripped off his wide belt and laid it on the porch. Next, he added his shirt to the pile and strode off across the courtyard towards the workers. The workers paused momentarily as Marak picked up a hammer and a handful of nails and pulled his way up the ladder to the roof of the shack. Marak grabbed a plank and began nailing it in place. The other workers looked at each other in concern as if the Lord was showing them the proper way of doing their job. Marak looked over at them and smiled.

"You looked like you could use a hand," he grinned. "There will be many volunteers to help you with the shacks and you should not have to worry about their station when they are up here with you."

The other workers smiled back and returned to their tasks. Several soldiers saw Marak's half naked form on the roof and soon a dozen of them were helping on the other shacks. Unoccupied guild workers soon joined in and within an hour there were more workers than jobs. Marak took a break and ordered a barrel of ale and some food brought out for the volunteer workers.

Over the next few weeks, the reconstruction party became a daily event with Marak always managing to get at least an hour in on the work. There were always enough workers and the building continued at a rapid pace. Friendships between people of the Fardale estate who would not normally come into contact with each other flourished and Fardale developed into more of a large, extended family than an estate ruled by a Clan Lord.

* * * *

Lord Quavry sat at the head of the table in his Meeting Chamber while his guest was shown in. The Sorgan Lord was surprised by the meeting request and was curious what had brought about the visit.

"Lord Quavry," the visitor began, "I thank you for agreeing to see me. I have information that can be mutually profitable, but I am a bit hesitant to begin."

"You think that I may speak of this meeting to those whom you would rather not know?" surmised Lord Quavry.

"That and other things," the visitor confirmed. "I must ask that this meeting and any others that may come out of it be kept in the strictest confidence," demanded the visitor. "Further, if you do receive gain with the information I have for you, you will entitle me to fair recompense."

"Done and done," agreed Lord Quavry quickly. "What possible information can a Situ have that will aid my coffers?"

"Information on your new neighbor, Lord Quavry," the visitor smiled. "Information on how he can be easily conquered."

"I think it wise to bring my Marshal into these talks, then," declared Lord Quavry as he signaled for a runner.

The Lord and his visitor waited in silence until Marshal Yenga arrived and took a seat. "Our visitor is here in confidence," explained Lord Quavry. "He has information about our new neighbors. I thought you should hear what is said."

Marshal Yenga was a tall, muscular man, not yet starting to gray. His firm body belied his mature years and his stony face stared at the visitor with interest. "I shall listen in confidence," the Marshal declared.

"Very well," the visitor responded. "I am not aware of the information you have on the new Situ Lord of Fardale, so some of what I have to say may be repetitious. Lord Marak is young and inexperienced. At Lituk Valley he was a Cortain, as you were probably aware. This is strange enough, but you should also be aware that he was only Cortain for a day before being made Lord of Fardale. My point is that the new Lord has little or no experience in managing anything more than a Squad."

The visitor waited for a response, but all he got were two blank stares and so he continued. "His very first act was to ordain a Council of Advisors to be composed of common people. A very sure sign that he does not know what to do. Even laborers and slaves would be represented on this Council."

The visitor was getting frustrated by the lack of expression from his Sorgan host, but quickly suppressed his desire to leave the meeting. "As you know, Lord Lashendo ran into some problems with his Chula neighbors. He was trying to expand into the Sitari Valley and the Chula were not cooperating. Unfortunately, his guards were not adequate and he was murdered in his sleep. Normally, the new Situ Lord would make his first priority to crush the Chula who dared to attack Fardale. The new Lord, however, crawled to the barbarians and promised not to go near Sitari Valley as long as the Chula would spare Fardale."

"Anyone who takes the word of a barbarian is a fool," spat Lord Quavry.

The visitor smiled and continued. "Lord Marak has shown that he is a fool in many ways, Lord Quavry. His next act was to house the slaves in the barracks and demand that they have new houses built for them. Lately, he has even freed those slaves and is paying them for the same work he was getting for free. He also allowed the Fardale Army to choose its new leaders without his own input."

"If the Lord does not select his own officers," interjected Marshal Yenga, "he can end up with officers which the men like, but don't have the necessary skills to lead their men."

"How does all of this help the Sorgan?" Lord Quavry asked impatiently.

"Lord Marak will lose control of Fardale if this season's crop is not sufficient to fulfill the contracts which Lord Lashendo negotiated," grinned the visitor. "His people are busy working on new shacks for the slaves. He has given up the option of using Sitari Valley and his army is incapable of defending itself. Doesn't this suggest a likely course of action to you, Lord Quavry?"

"Surely, Lord Ridak would just appoint another Lord," suggested Lord Quavry. "We do not wish a war with the entire Situ Clan."

"One would think that if Lord Ridak had an available Lord he could trust," chuckled the visitor, "he would have already sent him. I think Lord Ridak is ready to write Fardale off. The profits have been minimal and his aggravation has been great. I believe he wants a ready excuse as to why the contracts

were not fulfilled. Why else would he send a young son of a slave to be Lord of Fardale?"

"Lord Marak is the son of a slave?" quipped Lord Quavry. "I thought he might be Lord Ridak's son. That was the only reason I could see one so young given the reins of an estate."

"Certainly, he is not Lord Ridak's son," assured the visitor. "He is a young, inexperienced Squad Leader that doesn't have a clue as to how to run an estate."

"His selection as Lord of Fardale certainly does not speak well for Lord Ridak's management," summarized Lord Quavry, "but how does any of this information help the Sorgan Clan?"

"It is no secret that you would prefer that the Situ abandon Fardale," shrugged the visitor. "Use the excuse of an untrained Lord to force them out. Cut off his accessibility from Lituk Valley and he will have no one to turn to for help. You could claim that he violated your border and your only course of action would be war."

"So you want the Sorgan to wipe out Fardale," pondered Lord Quavry. "Why? What is in this for you?"

"I have been a loyal Situ for all of life," claimed the visitor, "but I cannot stomach what is being done in Fardale. When you attack Fardale, I, of course, will be taken captive. As is traditional, captives in a war must give Vows of Service to the conquering Lord. These new Vows legally cancel all other Vows of Service. I would become a loyal Sorgan Clan member and one who is already familiar with Fardale. I would make an excellent Lord of Fardale and administer it for the Sorgan Clan."

"Very ambitious," remarked Lord Quavry, "but it would appear that all of the risk would be mine. What are you prepared to do to earn your Title?"

"I will do what I must to ensure success," answered the visitor, "short of getting myself killed, that is. The Title would mean little to a dead man. We shall both assume some risk and reap appropriate rewards. Your risk may be greater, but your reward will also be much greater."

Lord Quavry looked to his Marshal for some sign of approval or disapproval. "Cutting off his communications with Lituk Valley would be child's play," Marshal Yenga commented. "If this Lord Marak is as unskilled as we have heard, our Army will have no problems defeating them. We outnumber them and we will have the element of surprise on our side."

"So, it can be done if we decide to," remarked Lord Quavry to the visitor. "Perhaps we will think on it and get back to you. How can you be reached?"

The visitor gritted his teeth and tried to smile at the same time. The result was humorous. "That depends on when you want to get back to me," the visitor answered stiffly. "If you want to get back to me sometime today, you will find me with Lord Burdine discussing this matter with the Litari Clan. Perhaps they have a greater desire to expand."

Lord Quavry's face burned red with anger and he slammed his fist on the table. "Do not toy with me!" he exclaimed. "I gave my word to keep this meeting secret, but I can cut your throat before you leave here and I am sure that no one would know where to look for your missing body. You have made one thing very clear to me. If we decide to go ahead with this plan, I will require you to get one of my people on Lord Marak's staff. If nothing else, he will be able to keep an eye on you."

"It will be impossible to get one of your people on Marak's staff," declared the visitor. "Marak demands

that every person on the estate swear the Vows of Service directly to him."

"And what of it?" countered Lord Quavry. "Whoever swears Vows to Lord Marak will be swearing them to me again in a matter of months. It will only be a minor inconvenience to whomever I choose. I am also going to need solid intelligence on this Lord Marak's every move. See that it happens right away."

"Does this mean you are prepared to go forth with my plan?" pushed the visitor.

"There is a field in Fardale that is close to my border," detailed Lord Quavry. "The soil is so poor that Lord Lashendo gave up cultivating it. Find some way to ensure that Lord Marak seeds it and I will claim a border infraction. I will have papers already in the capital to lodge a protest with the Council the moment he sends workers out there. Of course, we will not be able to wait for a Council Mediator to arrive, but that will be understandable. Lord Marak will not have filed any papers and we will prove, after the war, that he transgressed our border and we had to defend it."

The visitor smiled as he nodded. Lord Quavry scribbled a note and presented it to the visitor. "This is the name of the person whom you will get accepted on Lord Marak's staff. Present it on the way out and you can make arrangements for his travel."

The visitor rose and bowed his way out of the Meeting Chamber. "This plan is risky, Lord Quavry," Marshal Yenga declared. "Too much rests on that fool. The military angle is acceptable, but everything else is on shaky ground."

"You have only the military angle to worry about," stated Lord Quavry. "With my spy in place, that fool becomes expendable. In fact, you should ensure that he dies in the battle, so I do not have to break my word. I would never accept him as the Lord of Fardale."

"What if he does offer the same deal to Lord Burdine?" the Marshal quizzed.

"I will know if he does," chuckled Lord Quavry. "I intend to invite Lord Burdine into this operation. There will be no question of border infringement if Lord Burdine files a grievance at the same time as we do."

"You intend to split the Fardale estate with the Litari?" the Marshal asked shockingly.

"Certainly not," laughed Lord Quavry. "All the Litari will do is file the grievance. They will not be involved with the fighting or the spoils. What I can offer Lord Burdine is something he wants very much, though. He wants to cut the Ragatha Clan off from the outside world. He has already denied them the right to cross his lands, but they worked out some deal with the Situ to cross Fardale. If Lord Burdine helps me in this matter, I will stop the Ragatha Clan from crossing what would become Sorgan territory. There is little doubt that Lord Burdine will then take steps to claim Woodville for themselves and kick the Ragatha out of the area."

"I will issue orders to close off Fardale from Lituk Valley immediately," saluted Marshal Yenga.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Fisher

Kasa walked into Lord Marak's study and sat down, piling a stack of papers on the Lord's desk. Marak looked up at the young woman and smiled as he noticed his assistant had decided to let her short, black hair grow longer.

"Another pile of papers?" Marak quipped. "I sometimes think having an assistant is an invitation to a greater workload."

"This pile you will enjoy," beamed Kasa. "Our spy has uncovered a great deal on Bursar Tachora and his company, Khadora Grain Importers. I think you will find it quite interesting."

"When am I going to meet this spy of yours?" Lord Marak asked.

"He never meets with clients in person," explained Kasa. "I have never seen him. We have an elaborate routine, which allows us to transfer information. If I deviate from the routine, I may never hear from him again."

"Still," insisted Lord Marak, "I am not comfortable dealing with someone who is not known to me. Send him the request for a meeting again. Now, what have you got on Tachora?"

"I have the complete financial records for Khadora Grain Importers," grinned Kasa. "Every financial transaction they have ever made is listed here. They have been using the company as a place to store their profits. In past years they had to carefully time the receipt of grain so they could sell it to pay for the next shipment. This year that will not be necessary. They have enough reserves to pay for all of the contracts with Fardale without selling any grain to pay us."

"That only indicates that their scheme was profitable," sighed Marak. "Why does this knowledge make you smile so?"

"Because I have a plan," Kasa beamed. "The contracts we hold with Khadora Grain Importers do not require any prepayment of fees to us, with one exception. If they sell the contracts to someone else they are required to pay us in full even if the crop is not harvested yet."

"I fail to see how that can help us," commented Marak. "Tachora would not think of selling the contracts to someone else. That money is going to be his retirement fund when Fardale fails, which he is sure will happen this year."

"Ah, but he would sell the contracts," smiled Kasa. "If he feels that this year's crop will never be harvested, the contracts are worthless to him. If, however, he is offered an enormous profit to shed the contracts now, he will jump at the chance."

"Well," pondered Marak, "that would get us some money to work with, but we would still need to fulfill the contracts."

"Not necessarily," chuckled Kasa. "I am proposing that we buy the contracts ourselves. I have taken the liberty of forming a company to accomplish this very task. It is called the Ksaly Company and it will offer a contract to Khadora Grain Importers which I am sure Tachora will accept."

"Buy the grain ourselves?" mused Lord Marak. "We do not have the funds to pay for our own harvest. Ksaly Company ... what is that supposed to mean?"

"Ksaly is an Omungan word meaning one-legged bird," laughed Kasa. "The literal translation does mean much, but it is used humorously to indicate something which is worthless, like the inability of a one-legged bird to kick its opponent. As for the money, we will never pay Khadora Grain Importers. The contract we will offer will guarantee Tachora full payment on delivery of the first shipment. Ksaly Company will hold Khadora Grain Importers harmless for any shortages on the contracts, a phrase which Tachora will love. Buried in the pages of standard legal terms will be a clause which will deny Khadora Grain Importers any payment whatsoever if they have foreknowledge that the contracts with the grower can not be honored."

"Wouldn't Tachora notice the clause?" questioned Marak.

"Tachora's barrister is unaware of Tachora's position with Fardale," gleamed Kasa. "He will not see any thorns to warn Tachora about and I will make sure that Tachora is in a hurry when he goes to sign the contract."

"How are you going to manage that?" inquired Marak.

"Tachora will have to notify you that he will be away from the estate on an overnight trip," explained Kasa. "When he does, you will be delighted and tell Tachora to let me accompany him to the city. You will explain that I have business on your behalf in the city and you do not wish me to travel alone. He will want to sneak off to meet with his barrister so that I will not find out what he is doing. There is an arms merchant in the same office as Tachora's barrister. I will allow enough time for the barrister to describe the contract before I visit the arms merchant. When Tachora sees me, he will hastily sign the agreement and leave before I see him there. The rest will be easy."

"You are a very dangerous woman," Marak smiled admiringly. "We will get all of the money back that Tachora and Lashendo stole from Fardale and we will be free of the contracts which could devastate us."

"Yes," agreed Kasa, "and we will be free to negotiate real contracts for the grain."

"See to it immediately," ordered Marak. "We have a Council meeting now which I must attend. Let me know when to expect Tachora's request to travel to the city."

Lord Marak escorted Kasa to the door and then he proceeded to the Meeting Chamber. The room was already full with the members of his Council of Advisors and he hurried to his chair at the head of the table. Sitting down, Lord Marak extracted his notes from a pocket and took a few moments to scan the list of topics he wished to discuss.

Marak scanned the faces of the attendees and stopped when he saw the new Assistant Bursar sitting in the chair reserved for Bursar Tachora. "Assistant Bursar Mogry," opened Marak, "where is Bursar Tachora?"

"He asked me to sit in for him," Mogry explained. "He thought it would help me be a better assistant to him."

"Those may be his thoughts," stared Marak, "but they are not mine. When someone sits on this Council I expect him to be here, not send a replacement. This Council will wait while you fetch the Bursar and relay my orders for him to attend. Do not tarry."

The red-faced Assistant Bursar rose awkwardly and scampered out of the Meeting Chamber. Lord

Marak used the delay to review his list of topics.

"Forgive me, My Lord," Tachora apologized as he took his seat at the table. "I thought the exposure would be good for Mogry."

Lord Marak simply nodded and turned his attention to Seneschal Pito. "Seneschal, can you bring the Council up to date on estate matters beginning with the rebuilding effort?" ordered Marak.

"Certainly, Lord Marak," rose the Seneschal. "The rebuilding has proceeded faster than anyone could imagine, thanks to the efforts of many volunteers. We are just finishing the last three homes and people have already moved out of the barracks and into the new homes which are finished. There have been some minor complaints with the homes, but I am glad to report that they were resolved quickly."

Marak was pleased with the number of nodding heads around the table. The guilds who would normally object to the volunteer efforts had actually welcomed the help after Lord Marak volunteered his own time.

"The grain fields are erratic," continued Seneschal Pito. "Some of the fields are growing better than I have ever seen them grow while others are dismal failures. There does not appear to be any pattern as to which fields will produce and which will not, although most of the producing fields are on the outskirts of the estate."

"Are we any closer to getting the yield we will require to fulfill our contracts?" Marak asked while covertly watching Tachora for any signs of reaction.

"No," sighed Seneschal Pito. "We are getting more yield than expected from some of the fields, but we will still be far short of our commitments. I would like to add, Lord Marak, that the low yield is not due to the Fardale workers, but the soil. As most here are aware, I was very vocal in protesting your policy of freeing the slaves. I would like to acknowledge to everyone that I was wrong. Our workers' attitudes could not be better, nor could their productivity. I have not witnessed one incident of laziness or indifference since the program began."

"Thank you for your acknowledgement, Seneschal Pito," nodded Lord Marak. "What other items need to be addressed today?"

Lectain Zorkil rose to address the Council as the Army's representative. "Lord Marak, we are still having reports about Kywara sightings. It is never more than three at a time, but each sighting brings them closer to the mansion. The guards get nervous each time and I think it will ease matters if we ask them to keep their distance."

Marak smiled at his new Lectain while he wondered what the Kywara were up to. He had no reason to doubt Tmundo's word and did not believe the Kywara were a threat, yet they had to be coming closer for some reason. The Chula were known for avoiding contact with flatlanders, not walking up to their door. Perhaps it was time for Marak to pay another visit to Tmundo and ask him what he was doing.

"Lectain Zorkil," decided Marak, "I want you to stay after the Council session and I will discuss this with you further. What other items do we have to discuss?"

"I have received a suggestion to reopen one of the fields," contributed Bursar Tachora. "The field in question borders the Sorgan estate. Perhaps it can be of use in meeting our obligations."

"That field has very poor soil," offered Mage Klora. "Lord Lashendo ordered it abandoned after the yield was so poor that he determined we were wasting manpower working it."

"If Lord Marak would permit it," interjected Pachoma, a slave turned field laborer, "some of us would like to experiment with crops that may grow well in poor soil. This barren field sounds like the perfect place to attempt it. We would tend to it on our own time and the children could help."

"Excellent," agreed Marak. "The field is open for anyone who wants to tend it during their own time. If you can come up with a saleable crop that is better suited to our terrain, it will be welcomed."

Several minor matters were brought before the Council and were easily resolved. Lord Marak dismissed the Council and asked Seneschal Pito and Mage Klora to remain. When the rest of the Council had filtered out of the room, Marak pulled a large map of Fardale off the wall and spread it over the table.

"Show me where the sightings have been, Lectain Zorkil," Marak instructed.

Lectain Zorkil took coins from his pouch and started placing them on the map. Before he was done, the Seneschal interrupted him by pointing to three of the coins.

"When were these sightings?" Pito inquired as the Lectain continued to place his coins.

"They were all in the last week," answered Zorkil. "Why?"

"My Lord," sparkled the Seneschal, "I said there was no pattern to our fields that are producing well. I was mistaken. Lectain Zorkil has placed a coin on each of the producing fields. Only the last three represent fields that are performing poorly. Is it possible that the Kywara are doing something to enrich the soil of our fields?"

"If they are," added Mage Klora, "they are better mages than we are."

"No disrespect intended, Mage Klora," smiled Marak, "but I think that is exactly what they are doing. I suspected as much during the meeting. I requested that Tmundo help us with our fields. At the time I was requesting that he teach us how to improve the soil and he flatly refused. I think that after watching our peaceful efforts to improve ourselves, he has decided to help us covertly. Lectain Zorkil, you will issue orders for all Army personnel to wave at the Kywara whenever one is seen. They are not to be interfered with in any way. Let them walk right up to the mansion if they wish. Mage Klora, if you should happen to be around during one of these sightings, take a bucket of fresh water out to the Kywara visitors and offer it to them. Let them know that they are welcome and appreciated."

"As you wish," Mage Klora replied.

"Lectain Zorkil, Seneschal Pito, that is all," stated Marak. "I think we are finally getting somewhere."

After the two had left, Marak turned to his head mage. "Klora, I want to start meeting with your group everyday if you can spare the time from your other duties. Twice a week is not enough and we have a lot of ground to cover."

"The mages will be thrilled, Lord Marak," she replied. "We would also like to step up our schedule, but were afraid that you did not have the time available. Should we meet this afternoon?"

"Yes," Marak replied eagerly. "This afternoon and every day from now on. I think we are making

excellent progress and this news about the Kywara mages helping us spurs me on."

"Let me go inform the others, then," declared Kloria. "We will meet you there as always."

* * * *

"Why haven't we had word from Fardale?" demanded Lord Ridak. "I don't like the lack of communications."

"I can only assume that Lord Marak's men are running into the same problems as we are," offered Lord Marshal Grefon. "We have already lost three messengers to the bandits and a fourth who barely escaped with his life."

"We have never had bandits in this area before," complained the Lord of the Situ. "Why have they chosen such an inappropriate time to plague us? You should take a Corte into those hills and wipe them out."

"I do not wish to risk that many of my men to such a minor inconvenience," Grefon replied. "Besides, it may be better to have them as an excuse for being out of touch with your new young Lord. When Lord Marak runs into trouble he won't be able to call on us for help. That will make his incompetence more readily apparent. We need to concentrate our efforts on Raven's Point. If we intend to push the Morgar border back this fall, I want to be ready for it. We have already given up one Corte to Fardale. We should not waste another chasing bandits."

"Very well," conceded Lord Ridak. "I suppose you will not be planning to draw any troops out of Fardale for our push towards the Morgar."

"They won't be needed," determined Lord Marshal Grefon. "Troops from Stony Brook and River's Bend will be sufficient to accomplish our goal."

"I am still concerned about Lord Quilo getting involved," confided Lord Ridak. "If Lord Saycher calls upon his Organila ally, our whole plan could collapse. We could even be in danger of losing territory at Raven's Point."

"Lord Quilo may rant and rave at the Lords Council, but I doubt he will send troops," speculated Grefon. "If it looks like he might, we will push forward and take all of Lord Saycher's holdings. We can then negotiate about how much of it we will be willing to give back. After we are done with Raven's Point, we can concentrate on your Lord Marak."

"Yes, yes," smiled Lord Ridak, "that does sound appropriate. The troubles at Raven's Point will be another reason why we couldn't watch over Lord Marak and his dealings. No one will fault us for his failings."

* * * *

Marak strolled along the road on his way to meet with his mages for their daily session. The sessions were held in a field that was no longer cultivated and was situated in an area of the estate, which was seldom visited. Nobody other than the mages knew about the daily sessions and Lord Marak preferred to keep it that way. So it was that Marak registered no small amount of shock when a black clad man stepped out of the bushes before him, blocking the way. The two men stood measuring each other for some moments before Lord Marak spoke.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Marak demanded while watching the black clad man's hands for

any sign of him reaching for a weapon.

"You can call me Fisher, Lord Marak," the man smiled, "and what I want is a moment of your time."

Marak glanced up the road towards his meeting spot with the mages and quickly returned his eyes to the black clad man. "You appear to know me," declared Lord Marak, "and yet I am sure we have never met. I will grant you your moment, but I want to know more about you before you leave."

"I will make no guarantees," smiled Fisher. "I have come to find out more about you. You are doing things with your estate that have never been done before and I want to know why."

"You are rather bold to question a Lord about his affairs on his own estate," ventured Marak as he moved his hand closer to his sword hilt. "It is I who should be interrogating you. Who sent you here?"

Fisher laughed and lowered himself to the ground, placing his back against a tree. "Sit and talk, Lord Marak," Fisher chuckled. "I know you are fast and strong with your weapons, but I have not come today to test your mettle. Besides, you may find me a match for your skills, Omunga Stars and all."

Marak blinked at the sudden realization that this stranger knew a good deal about him. It was not so much the mention of the Omunga Stars, as their use was being taught to the Army in Fardale, but Fisher appeared to know how Marak would react to his every movement. His sitting down was meant to put Marak at ease and it almost did, but Marak knew how well a man could attack from a sitting position. Marak studied the man and his black outfit. His clothing was perfect for stealth and covert actions. He carried a double-edged sword like the one Marak practiced with, but it was in a sheath on the man's back, which seemed very practical. Fisher's body seemed to be all muscle, but he was not a very tall man, nor would one notice his fitness unless one was looking for it. His black uniform was covered with pockets and pouches and Marak imagined what those pouches might hold.

Fisher sensed Marak's hesitation and spoke. "You asked to see me, Lord Marak," Fisher smiled. "I don't normally meet with a client, but I am curious. I pressed Kasa for details about you, but I am afraid she sees with a woman's eyes, which was not sufficient for me. There is really very little known about you other than your Army career."

Realization dawned on Marak as he realized that this was Kasa's spy. "Why are you trying to find out information about me?" quizzed Marak. "I thought we were paying you to investigate someone else."

"I thought you would be more pleased with what I have turned up on Bursar Tachora," frowned Fisher. "Perhaps you are a hard man to please. Why have you freed your slaves?"

"Your information has been excellent," admitted Marak, "assuming it is correct."

Fisher feigned shock at Marak's words. "Every word is truth," admonished Fisher. "If I ever pass you questionable information, it will be noted as such. Why have you freed your slaves?"

Marak stared at the man, trying to determine his motives for asking that question. He knew very little about this man whom Kasa rated so highly, other than the fact that he did not reveal himself to his clients. Yet, here he was. "I abhor slavery," Marak finally answered. "People should not be owned like wasooki.

If you expect people to work for you, you should treat them with respect for the job they are doing. Now, why have you broken your rule about meeting with clients?"

"Fair enough," agreed Fisher. "You intrigue me, Lord Marak. I have done work for most of the Clans in

Khadora and you are definitely not a typical Lord. I am curious about what makes you different and what you plan to do with your newly found powers. I do not meet with clients because I may be working against them the following month, so none of them should know what I look like. From what I have discovered about you so far, I do not think I would be willing to work against you. What are your plans for your Situ estate? Are you just another lackey for Lord Ridak? Or are you planning to change the very nature of life in Khadora?"

Marak felt satisfied enough about Fisher's reasons for meeting him to sit down himself. "I am not the lackey Lord Ridak believes," Marak admitted. "He may get me in the end, but the people of Fardale are free of Situ rule. They no longer owe any allegiance to Lord Ridak. Where all of this is leading, I do not know. Life in Khadora is unfair for most of the people. A couple of hundred Lords rule the country and treat everyone else like dirt. I plan to change as much of that as I can before they get me. When I am done Khadora will have a new class of people, free men with no allegiance to any Lord."

"Won't they have allegiance to Lord Marak?" inquired Fisher.

"In the beginning I will require it," admitted Lord Marak, "but eventually I will be gone and with me will go the need for their allegiance. Why is this so important to you?"

"I have a decision to make," exposed Fisher. "My family was killed by one of Khadora's fine Lords. I have devoted my life to avenging their death. I started to gather information on this particular Lord and found out that I was very good at what I do. The selling of my services provide the funds I need to avenge my family. The information I gathered on you makes me set my sights on a finer goal. I share your feelings about Khadora and would love to see things changed. If you are successful, my original goal will be met anyway. The country can not change without the death of the Lord I seek to kill."

"Who is this Lord who has wronged your family?" Marak asked.

"It is better at this time that you do not know," declared Fisher. "I am not yet convinced that you will succeed with your plan and I would not want this Lord to know he is hunted."

"Fair enough," understood Marak. "Now that you know where I am headed, will you still perform tasks for me?"

"More than you know," chuckled Fisher. "If you are amenable to taking me into your confidence, I will work for no one else. I can be of much more help to you than you know. For example, I know that the bandits who are blocking runners between you and Lituk Valley are not bandits at all."

"Not bandits," frowned Marak. "Then who are they and why are they stopping my runners?"

"They are actually soldiers of the Sorgan Clan, one of your neighbors," informed Fisher. "Lord Quavry has cut you off from Lituk Valley for some reason. I don't know the reason yet, but I will find out. We will talk again soon. I have some things to do and you have your mages waiting for you."

"How did you know?" Marak asked shockingly.

"I heard them talking while I was waiting for you," chuckled Fisher. "There is also a package for you behind the large tree over there. I know you will appreciate it as few men would."

Fisher rose and disappeared into the foliage. Marak got to his feet, shaking his head. Never did he have a meeting so bizarre and, yet, Fisher could prove to be an extremely important ally. Something about

Fisher made Marak want to trust him. He knew the man's trade required leaving people with just that impression, but Marak felt his was more than that. He walked over and retrieved the long, paper-wrapped package and hurried to his appointment with the mages.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 11 Feud

Marak lay awake staring at the ceiling in his dark bedroom. The sounds of Fardale had quieted hours ago, but Marak found no comfort in the silence. He thought back to his days as Squad Leader and laughed out loud. Life was simpler then without the intrigue and schemes, which were part of running an estate. He hadn't heard from Fisher in two weeks and for some reason that bothered Marak. He still had no idea what the Sorgans were up to and that meant trouble. He had learned that Lord Quavry disliked the very existence of Fardale, but nothing that would indicate any overt hostilities.

Kasa was doing better with the Ksaly Company. As she predicted, Tachora swallowed the contract offer instantly and his funds had already been transferred to the Fardale coffers. At least Fardale would not have a problem honoring their contracts and that was Marak's first priority. Lord Marak sat up and lit a candle. Hastily he scribbled a note to replace Tachora as Bursar in the morning. There was no longer a need to pretend that he was not aware of the Khadora Grain Importers now that he had their money. It was time for Kasa to become the first female Situ Bursar. Lord Ridak would choke on his breakfast when he found out. As far as Marak knew, there was not a female Bursar in the entire country. It was just one more change, which Khadora needed. Her first job would be to find a market for the grain, which Fardale would begin harvesting soon.

The lack of communication with Lord Ridak bothered him as well. Marak was in no hurry to reestablish communications, but Lituk Valley should be. Still, there were no runners from Lord Ridak or Lord Marshal Grefon.

The most exciting development had been the confirmation of Marak's ideas about magic. Mages of one discipline were quite capable of learning the other disciplines provided they had the proper training. Marak still hosted the two-hour meeting in secrecy every day and most of Fardale's mages were now proficient in at least two disciplines. Even better than Marak had expected, mixed teams of mages could link together and produce results far greater than the same number of mages working alone. Marak scribbled another note to have Kasa start buying any slave mages she found for sale.

Lectain Zorkil continued to plot the visits of the Kywara and it became very evident that the Chula were enriching Fardale's fields somehow. The Kywara reacted favorably to the soldiers' waves and the water brought out by Klora's mages. They started visiting the closer fields and Fardale's harvest promised to be a good one. Marak's thoughts lingered on the Kywara and he decided it was time to visit them again.

Marak rose and retrieved the package Fisher had left for him. The spy continually amazed Marak. His opening gift had been a duplicate of the blacksuit that Marak had admired, complete with a back sheath which fit Marak's double-edged sword. This gift was purchased and delivered before Fisher ever met the Lord of Fardale and yet it was exactly what Marak would have wanted if he had known what to ask for.

Marak laid the blacksuit out on the bed and was preparing to put it on when he heard a sound from the doorway. Marak grabbed his sword and twirled around as he dropped to a crouch.

"There is nothing wrong with your reflexes," chuckled Fisher from the doorway. "Did I interrupt something?"

"A man could die sneaking around like that," scowled Lord Marak. "You should learn to announce yourself in a less startling fashion."

"Sorry," apologized Fisher, "but most people would not have heard me. I see the stories about you are true. Are you just admiring my gift or were you planning something fun?"

Marak motioned for Fisher to enter as he sat down on the bed. "I was planning a trip to the forest," explained Marak. "Too many thoughts nag my mind for me to get a decent night's sleep. How did you know I would appreciate your gift?"

"The sword sheath was easy," remarked Fisher. "Whenever any soldier talks about your strange habits, your practicing with the double-edged sword is the first topic of conversation. I happen to share your admiration for that type of blade. As for the blacksuit, what warrior would ask for a finer garment? It is tight enough to avoid getting snagged on bushes and yet loose enough to be comfortable. The color is obvious for anyone who works at night and you strike me as one Khadoran who is not afraid of the dark. I think it will appeal to your taste more than the gaudy green and yellow colors of the Situ Clan."

"You are a logical and thorough man," laughed Marak. "I have never understood why Khadorans refuse to attack at night. It seems perfectly logical to me to attack when your enemy is not likely to see you coming. Anyway, it is a gift I will treasure forever. You have been gone a long time. What brings you here tonight?"

"A bit of disturbing news, I'm afraid," whispered Fisher as he slid down into a chair. "I have been scouting around the Sorgan estate to find out what they are up to. Lord Quavry had a busy day today. Lord Burdine of the Litari Clan was an early morning visitor. His meeting with Lord Quavry did not last long, but it culminated in the release of a pigeon. Some Clans who have multiple estates use pigeons to communicate with their Clan Lord, but Lord Quavry could only be sending a message to the capital."

"What message could Lord Quavry and Lord Burdine be sending that would be a joint message?" quizzed Lord Marak.

"Well, it could be a joining of their Clans, though I doubt it," remarked Fisher. "It could also be some joint business deal. By itself it means really very little, but the rest of the day Lord Quavry spent in meetings with Marshal Yenga. Yenga's troops are also on short duty, which would indicate that they are going to see action soon. There were no troops from the Litari at Lord Quavry's so I don't think the Litari are involved in any military action unless they are attacking separately."

"Do you think they would dare attack Fardale?" queried Lord Marak.

"If they did so without at least some provocation," considered Fisher, "they would appear very aggressive to the other Clans and that is not a view to be desired. Khadora has a way of subduing aggressive Lords. The proper way to wipe out your neighbor is to anger him into attacking you first, then you appear to be forceful in defending your estate while you are expanding it. You haven't done anything to anger Lord Quavry have you?"

"Certainly not," frowned Lord Marak. "I have enough trouble managing Fardale without looking for trouble elsewhere. I did intend on visiting Lord Quavry in an attempt to better relations, but I have not

had the time yet."

"As I expected," grimaced Fisher. "So you have not authorized Bursar Tachora to negotiate with the Sorgan?"

"Tachora?" mouthed Lord Marak. "You, of all people, should know that I would never use Tachora as an envoy. Why do you ask?"

"Because he visited Lord Quavry this evening," declared Fisher. "And judging by the reactions of the mansion guards, he was not unknown to them."

"So, Tachora is playing games with the Sorgan, as well," suggested Marak. "I was planning on retiring him this morning and letting Kasa take over as Bursar. If he has somehow indebted Fardale to Lord Quavry, my treatment of him will not be so polite."

"As Bursar," asked Fisher, "does Tachora have any authority which might be used to anger the Sorgan?"

"I can't think of any," answered Marak. "We have no financial dealings with Lord Quavry or Lord Burdine. Tachora and Lord Lashendo entered an agreement with Lord Zawbry of the Ragatha to allow for their transit across Fardale, but I know of no other agreements with local Lords. What could Tachora be scheming with Lord Quavry? Do you think he might be entering into grain agreements with them?"

"That is a possibility," admitted the spy. "I will try to delve a little deeper into Sorgan affairs. Where were you heading when I came in?"

"Someplace where you would not be welcome," stated Marak. "I was going to visit some friends."

"You consider the Kywara friends?" asked Fisher.

"Yes, I ... how do you do that?" demanded Lord Marak. "I never once mentioned the Kywara and you knew where I was going. Do you read minds as well as your other crafts?"

"No," laughed Fisher. "I just learn to listen to everything and logically put facts together. You would never wear the blacksuit to visit any of your own men and, according to Kasa, you have not looked at a woman since you arrived in Fardale. You are not on friendly terms with any of your three Khadoran neighbors. The logical assumption is you are going to meet with the Kywara, who would, incidentally, appreciate your choice of garments."

"And how do you know they would appreciate my clothing?" pushed Lord Marak.

"I have known Tmundo for many years," smiled Fisher.

"How is it that you know the leader of the Kywara?" queried Lord Marak. "Surely they are not clients of yours."

"I am half Kywara," frowned Fisher. "I sought Tmundo's advice when my family was killed. My mother was Kywara and my father served in a Khadoran Army. She left the tribe to be with him. They were very much in love."

"Who is the Lord who had your family killed and why?" asked Marak.

"That is something I do not wish to discuss," straightened Fisher. "Come, I will accompany you to the Kywara. It has been a long time since I have tasted the good life. Perhaps Tmundo will have some wisdom concerning Lord Quavry. You will find that not much escapes Kywara eyes."

"All right," agreed Lord Marak as he donned his blacksuit. "I will get a horse for you. Or did you bring your own?"

"We do not need horses," chuckled Fisher. "We have legs that work very well. Have you never ridden a tiger?"

Marak paused and stared at the spy. "Are you serious?" gaped the Lord of Fardale. "I look at those beasts and am thankful they don't eat me."

"Then you shall have a treat tonight," Fisher laughed. "The big cats are much faster for this type of journey. You said the Kywara were your friends. Would you insult a friend by refusing his food or drink?"

Lord Marak paused as he shoved his double-edged sword into its sheath. "I intend to learn a great deal from you, Fisher," Marak said softly, "but if you get me killed, you have to find another client."

The two blacksuited men crept out of the mansion and made their way to a small service gate in the wall. Marak unlatched the gate and led Fisher out. Fisher hesitated outside the gate and Marak turned to see him rigging the latch with a thin piece of stiff cord. "We might want to reenter the same way," whispered the spy.

Marak simply shook his head in disbelief and waited. When Fisher completed his preparations on the latch, he turned and took the lead. Together they ran silently, keeping to the darkest areas of the estate. Marak marveled at the comfortable feel of the blacksuit and the firmness with which his back sheath rode while he ran. Once they were well beyond sight of anyone guarding the walls, Fisher stopped and issued a series of bird calls. It sounded to Marak as if Fisher was conversing in bird talk. Another series of calls answered Fisher's and then they waited in silence.

"What are we waiting for?" whispered Lord Marak.

Fisher just smiled and pointed. Marak's mouth hung open as a Kywara warrior approached riding a tiger. It was not the sight of the warrior that shocked Marak. It was the two unburdened tigers that accompanied him.

"You can't be serious," protested Lord Marak.

"Did you not feel terrorized the first time you straddled a horse?" laughed Fisher. "They are very intelligent and you will be exhilarated by their swiftness. Just don't kick them to make them go faster. You only need to pat their shoulders with a rhythm. The faster the rhythm, the faster the ride. If you wish to slow or stop, smooth your hand over its shoulder."

Marak shook his head in disbelief, but he watched Fisher mount the tiger and then did the same maneuver and found himself astride a beast that would terrorize most Khadorans just by looking at them. The Lord of Fardale was amazed at the relative smoothness of the ride. It was not the bouncy wobble of a horse, but a powerful lope as the beast seemed to barely touch the ground. Marak leaned far forward as the giant cat sprang up the mountainside and the ride was over before the novelty wore off.

"So, you have decided to become a Kywara?" greeted Tmundo. "I wondered when you and Fisher would get together."

Marak slid off the tiger as an involuntary spasm rippled through his body. "I have never experienced such a ride," commented Lord Marak. "Such power and yet so graceful. No wonder you scorn horses."

"Flatlander," chuckled Fisher. "It is an honor to be welcomed back to your home, Tmundo. It has been a long time."

"Too long, favored son of the Kywara," embraced Tmundo. "I heard that you were skulking around these parts and knew you could not resist a visit before long."

"You keep good company, Lord Marak of Fardale," Tmundo said as he turned to greet Marak.

"So I have come to learn," agreed Marak. "I have been meaning to visit for some time. You have my deepest gratitude for your people's efforts in Fardale. You have become a most welcome neighbor."

"As have you," greeted Rykoma. "An old Kywara proverb states that a prosperous neighbor is a peaceful neighbor."

"I wish all of my neighbors agreed with your proverbs," sighed Marak. "Still, your help is a blessing to the people of Fardale. Admittedly, there is still some fear of the Kywara and their strange beasts, but the people of Fardale are a good people and they will learn to appreciate their neighbors."

"As their Lord already has," interjected Fisher. "Tmundo, what do you hear of the Sorgan?"

"Come," motioned Tmundo towards his hut, "let us sit and refresh ourselves while we talk. Join us, Rykoma. Your insight is always useful."

"At least one flatlander has learned how to dress," remarked Rykoma as they entered Tmundo's hut.

"We know that Lord Quavry is blocking you from getting to Lord Ridak," Tmundo offered, "but we did not think you would care. He would probably not be pleased if he had word of the improvements you have made at Fardale. The bandits do not trouble anyone but the green and yellow of the Situ Clan. One of your laborers could walk through the valley unmolested if he wore nondescript clothing and I assume the same is true for Lord Ridak's men. The Sorgan have not been a concern of the Kywara in many generations. They learned early not to invade our lands and have kept a respectable distance away ever since."

Marak did not need to ask how the Sorgan learned their lesson. The tales of the Situ massacres were still too fresh in Fardale. That was one of the problems Marak faced in convincing his people that the Kywara were friends.

"We do know that the Ragatha are leery of you," Tmundo continued. "They are bitter enemies of the Litari and Fardale is their only route to the outside world. They do not respect the Kywara and we do not allow them on our land. They, too, have had to learn a lesson, but they are slow learners. There will certainly be trouble if you attempt to restrict their access. We have seen some of their spies watching you to see what you will do, but they do not get close enough to tell what you are doing. It is a rather foolish way of gathering information."

"I should have made contact with my neighbors by now," admitted Marak, "but I have become

engrossed in daily affairs of Fardale. I will attempt to rectify that soon."

"Making contact with these other flatlanders will not necessarily result in better relations," Tmundo pointed out. "They are as likely to take your revisions to Fardale as a sign of weakness as they are to accept them. Tread carefully, friend."

"That seems to be the motto of Khadoran life," sighed Lord Marak. "Do the Chula have infighting like the Khadorans?"

"Perhaps it was so once," offered Rykoma, "but if it was, it is past anyone's memory. The Chula once roamed the breadth of what is now Khadora. There was no need for territorial disputes. In fact, we were primarily nomads and farmers. The wars that drove us to the mountains started with the coming of the Khadorans. We had few warrior skills back then. Our people hid in the forests and in the mountains and learned how to fight. If we had the skills then that we do now, there would be no Khadora. That is why no Chula will give up another grain of land to Khadora. Once they start to take our land, nothing will stop them but death."

The talk continued well into the night and Marak and Fisher were given a hut to rest in until morning.

* * * *

Lord Quavry stood on the mansion porch watching his returning soldiers. Marshal Yenga dismounted and ordered the men dismissed.

"Well?" questioned Lord Quavry as his Marshal mounted the steps to the porch. "How did it go?"

"It didn't go," growled Marshal Yenga. "There was nothing in the field except women and children. Tachora promised the field would be guarded."

"You didn't attack!" screamed Lord Quavry. "I gave you orders to attack that field."

"As I said," reiterated Marshal Yenga, "there were no Situ soldiers. Did you expect my men to murder a bunch of women and children?"

"I expected you to follow your orders," howled Lord Quavry. "You are not to make the decision about which battles you will fight. Your actions will ruin me. Get your men back out there and kill those Situ and do it now."

"My men are trained soldiers, Lord Quavry," Marshal Yenga declared. "They always stand ready to fight and die for the Sorgan Clan, but I will not order them to massacre innocents. If you wish, I will send them to crush the entire Situ garrison. They are well trained and ready for the task and..."

"You insolent whelp," screamed Lord Quavry. "I said to take your men and kill everyone in that field and that is what you will do. Now, move your men out."

"I can not order my men to kill women and children," repeated Marshal Yenga.

"You are refusing a direct order?" yelled Lord Quavry. "The message has already been sent to the capital. We must strike now. Fardale must be provoked into attacking us today. You have received my direct order, Marshal Yenga. You are under the Vows of Service to this Clan and I will invoke my rights if you refuse, Marshal. Get your men back to that field and do your job."

"I can not and will not order my men to kill innocents," confirmed Marshal Yenga.

Lord Quavry reached up and slapped Yenga across the face. "Lectain Meltord," shouted Lord Quavry.

A soldier sporting the plume of a Lectain in the Sorgan Clan stepped smartly forward. "Yes, Lord Quavry," he saluted.

"You are the new Marshal of the Sorgan Clan, Meltord," declared Lord Quavry. "This ... this Chula chip before me is now a slave. Throw him in the slave compound. If he tries to escape he is to be killed. Then get your men back to that field and kill everyone there."

"Yes, Lord Quavry," saluted the new Marshal.

Yenga looked in disgust at his former Lectain and marched voluntarily to the slave compound. He had never liked Meltord nor did he approve of his being a Lectain, but Lord Quavry had demanded the promotion of his favored cousin. Yenga wished he had objected more strenuously at the time.

Meltord plucked Yenga's helmet off his head as he shoved him into the slave compound. "I always knew you didn't have the stomach for battle," snarled Meltord. "Frightened off by a bunch of women and children."

Yenga let the taunts fall on deaf ears. He had made his decision and he would make it again if need be. Yenga had fought in battles before Meltord was old enough to join the Army and he had never stooped to killing innocents to win his battles. He trained his men well and had a superb understanding of strategy and tactics. He had little doubt that his men could defeat Fardale outright without such disgusting ploys. After his anger was played out, Yenga began to weep for his men, as well as for the innocents they were about to kill. He knew his men could not make the decision he had just made, but he also knew that a lot of arrows would be wasted this morning. His men were excellent shots, ... when they wanted to be.

Lord Quavry watched as Marshal Meltord formed his men back into columns. He still shook with anger towards Yenga as he watched the columns ride out towards the Situ border.

Marshal Meltord smiled gleefully as he issued orders to his men to fan out and form a line. The men were reacting slowly, but Meltord did not notice. He sat high on his horse and gazed out over the Situ field while his men moved forward. He grinned when he scanned the horizon and could not see a single Situ soldier. Marshal Meltord shouted the order to commence firing and the women and children in the field looked towards the woods with surprised faces.

The arrows flew in great masses of arcs and fell on the screaming innocents. Most of the arrows failed to hit a target and plummeted into the soil, but Marshal Meltord laughed giddily as the bodies fell to the ground. In seconds it was over and screams rent the air. The woods were silent except for the cackle of the Sorgan Marshal. He watched eagerly to see if any wounded tried to crawl to safety. One elderly woman sat up and stared at the mounted Sorgan in disbelief.

Marshal Meltord drew his sword and charged into the field to end the impudent woman's staring. He drove his horse towards the woman and raised his sword high. With a shout of triumph he swung his sword clear through the woman's neck. As her head rolled along the soil of the field, he heard another woman scream. He pivoted his horse and saw a younger woman on her knees with the body of a child before her. Marshal Meltord again raised his sword high and yelled as he charged the young woman.

As Marshal Meltord started his downward swing his mouth opened in shock and he tumbled from his

horse. His body hit the ground and his lifeless eyes stared at the young woman. The woman rose and retrieved her pitchfork from the Sorgan's chest. Her eyes opened wide in astonishment when she saw the three arrows protruding from the man's back. She looked towards the forest and saw the retreating line of Sorgan soldiers heading back towards their own territory. The woman threw the pitchfork down and began the search for survivors.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 12

Exposure

Lord Marak and Fisher rode tigers back from the Kywara village and dismounted well away from the walls of Fardale. Quietly, the two black clad men walked towards the estate. Marak was the first to notice the lack of men upon the wall and he broke into a run. As he ran through the main gate he saw the large crowd assembled in the courtyard. He pushed his way through the crowd and came to a halt in the center, where the bodies of thirteen women and children were stretched out on the ground. He looked around quickly and spotted Lectain Zorkil approaching.

"Lord Marak," greeted Lectain Zorkil, "we looked everywhere for you. The field on the border of Watula Valley was attacked by Sorgans earlier this morning. Thirteen are dead and twice that number are wounded. I posted a Corte at the border and gave instructions for the rest of the men to prepare for battle. What are your instructions?"

Lord Marak could smell revenge in the air over the courtyard and gazed at the faces of sadness and hatred surrounding him. An unprovoked attack was not usual in Khadora, but it was not without precedent, either. One thing was for sure, Lord Quavry would be ready for retaliation by the Situ.

"Recall the men from the border," ordered Lord Marak. "I want everyone in Fardale inside the walls immediately with the exception of Tagoro's Corte. I want Cortain Tagoro's men to hide in the woods to the West. He is to remain hidden and avoid any confrontation until he sees a flaming arrow from the walls. If we send the signal, he will attack the forces outside the walls, trapping them between himself and us. After everyone is inside except Tagoro's men, seal the estate. Nobody comes in or leaves without express permission from me. As soon as you have issued the orders, assemble the Council of Advisors in the Meeting Chamber."

Marak dashed into the mansion and changed out of his blacksuit, wondering what had become of Fisher. The spy did not follow Marak through the main gate but Marak could use his advice right now. Lord Marak hurried to the Meeting Chamber and found it filled not only with Council Members, but others as well. This was one session in which Marak did not object to the others being present. He recognized that some of the extras were spouses or parents to those whose bodies lay in the courtyard. Marak walked to the head of the table and called for silence.

"I want an eyewitness to describe what happened this morning," he ordered.

A dirty woman with blood on her tunic walked over to the table and stood facing Lord Marak. "I am Elsa and I was in the field when it was attacked," she began. "We assembled early this morning to get some time in the field before our regular duties began. There was no warning of the attack until their leader yelled for the men to shoot their arrows. They were hidden in the woods along the edge of the field and they just started shooting arrows. There were so many arrows in the air that I didn't know what

to do. I saw a child who had been hit in the back with an arrow and hurried over to help her. It was all over very quickly and my only thought was in helping the poor child. I put my pitchfork down and was pulling the arrow out when I heard a horse and looked up."

The room was silent as Elsa tried to compose herself. Seneschal Pito handed Elsa a handkerchief to dry her tears and after a moment she continued. "The Sorgan Marshal rode his horse onto the field and rode toward an old woman who was hysterical. She was kneeling in the dirt and screaming and he just rode up to her and ... and he just sliced her head off. Just like that. She wasn't doing anything but screaming. I must have screamed because he looked up and stared directly at me. The next thing I remember is the Marshal riding toward me with his sword held high. His face was twisted with rage and he was ... he was laughing. He was actually laughing as he rode to kill me. I knew I couldn't outrun him and I couldn't leave the child there to be killed. I ... I picked up my pitchfork and shoved it into his chest and he fell off his horse."

Elsa's voice was breaking and the Seneschal gave her a glass of water. There was not a whisper in the room as everyone waited for Elsa to continue. "When he fell," Elsa continued, "I saw three arrows protruding from his back. I looked towards the woods and saw that the Sorgan soldiers were leaving. No one came for his body and they didn't appear to have any interest in firing more arrows, so I started to help the survivors. That's all I remember of the attack, Lord Marak."

"Thank you, Elsa," Marak consoled. "I am sorry that I had to ask you to relive the attack, but I need to know what happened. Have you ever seen Sorgan soldiers around the field before?"

"No, Lord Marak," Elsa sobbed. "Even when we tried to cultivate that field in prior years, there was no sign of Sorgans. The only time I remember seeing Sorgans before was when they came to talk with Lord Lashendo."

Marak looked toward Lectain Zorkil. "Have you heard about any provocation toward the Sorgan, Lectain?" asked Marak.

"No, Lord Marak," Zorkil replied. "All encounters with anyone outside Fardale are supposed to be reported and we have had no reports. I can not see how the Sorgans were provoked."

"Have you detected any Litari troop movements?" queried Marak.

"None," Lectain Zorkil answered.

"I doubt the Litari would be involved with this," offered Bursar Tachora. "They do not get along well with the Sorgan."

Marak whipped his head around to stare at the Bursar and noticed that Mogry, the Bursar's assistant, was with him. Marak intended to replace Tachora with Kasa as Bursar this morning, but that was an item that could wait until this crisis was resolved. Or could it? Tachora surely knew that the Litari and the Sorgan were on speaking terms, at least.

"Lord Marak," interjected Lectain Zorkil, "when shall we attack? I have the men prepared and I am sure it will be a vicious battle. Lord Quavry undoubtedly has his men ready for the attack. If we delay too long, we will run the risk of nightfall before the battle is over."

"Who put the arrows in their Marshal's back?" Marak asked without answering Zorkil's question.

"They were Sorgan arrows, Lord Marak," Zorkil replied. "The man shot was not Marshal Yenga, though. He was in the uniform of the Sorgan Marshal, but I have met Yenga before and the body was not his."

"Pardon, Lord Marak," interrupted Bursar Tachora, "but does it really matter whose arrows they were? The Sorgan have brutally attacked us and we must retaliate immediately. If we delay, they will see it as a sign of weakness and attack us."

Murmurs of agreement resonated through the room with more than one voice vowing swift revenge for the lost Situ. The mood of the Meeting Chamber was ugly. Each person in attendance, from poor bloodstained Elsa to old Seneschal Pito, appeared ready to march on the enemy themselves.

The whole Sorgan attack smelled of a baiting to Marak. The strategy was similar to the one Marshal Garouk had planned for the Chula, force the enemy to attack and annihilate them when they struck back. Well, Lord Marak was not going to play by their ridiculous rules. If the Sorgan wanted war, they would get it, but on Marak's terms, not Lord Quavry's.

"There will be no attack today," declared Lord Marak. "I want the body of their Marshal identified."

Angry protests filled the room. None were so loud nor directed at Lord Marak to be offensive, but it was clear that the Situ of Fardale wanted revenge and they wanted it now. Marak had served with the Army long enough to recognize the actions of men who had performed their duty although they didn't want to. It was clear to him where the three arrows had come from and he had no desire to kill men whose only crime was following orders which they had to.

Elsa dropped to her knees alongside Lord Marak and cried. "Please, Lord Marak," she pleaded, "you must allow us to avenge our loved ones. I will gladly go with the soldiers to pay our revenge."

Angry shouts echoed her plea, but Lord Marak knew that no one would break their Vows of Service to lead an Army into Watula Valley. He gently raised Elsa to her feet. "Your loved ones will be avenged," Marak promised, "but it will be done the way I want and when I want."

Tachora's voice carried easily over the angry murmuring. "It must be today, Lord Marak," he insisted knowing the mediator from the Lords Council would arrive from the capital soon. "As Bursar, I must inform you that we will face financial ruin if we delay. Even as we speak, none of our fields are being tended."

Lord Marak eased Elsa into his chair and turned to face Tachora. "As Bursar," Marak said clearly, "you will advise me of nothing. You are no longer the Bursar for Fardale. Kasa is now our Bursar. I should also tell you that Khadora Grain Importers is bankrupt. You will never see payment for our grain because of a clause you failed to notice in your recent transaction with the Ksaly Company."

Tachora turned white with shock as Marak's words registered. Somehow Marak had found out about his little side business and turned the tables on him. Financially, Tachora was ruined unless he could depose Lord Marak. "I don't know what you are talking about," Tachora stubbornly lied.

"Perhaps..." smiled Lord Marak as everyone in the room tried to figure out what was going on, "you can help identify the Sorgan Marshal's body. Maybe it was somebody you saw yesterday when you were secretly meeting with Lord Quavry? Whatever plan you two have cooked up, I am not going to follow the script. The Situ are not going to launch a vengeance attack on the Sorgan's."

Tachora was visibly shaken and the angry crowd was beginning to look at him as if he were the perpetrator of the attack. He rose from his chair and stood behind his assistant. "If you will not attack Watula Valley," sneered Tachora, "then I can at least ensure that they attack you, Lord Marak. You see, my assistant is Lord Quavry's son and when it is learned that he was killed by the Situ, nothing will be able to stop the Sorgan Army from tearing Fardale apart."

Marak gazed in horror as he saw the knife in Tachora's hand dripping fresh blood on the floor. He looked at Tachora's assistant and saw his head pressed against the tabletop as if he was sleeping. Without hesitation, Marak flipped one of his wrist knives across the room and into Tachora's arm. Tachora howled in pain as he dropped his own knife. Before Tachora could react, two of Zorkil's men took hold of him and removed Marak's knife from his arm.

"Lock him up," demanded Lord Marak, "and see that his arm is bandaged. I want him alive."

"He's dead," announced Seneschal Pito as he checked Mogry for signs of life. "Tachora is right about the Sorgan reaction if Lord Quavry finds out about his son."

"Is there anyone here who is anxious to run over to Watula Valley and tell him?" Marak snapped. "This meeting is over. Everyone leave and try to find some way of keeping busy for the rest of the day."

Marak signaled for his four closest advisors to stay as the rest of the people filed out of the Meeting Chamber. Kasa, Zorkil, Klor, and Pito moved to chairs near Lord Marak.

"Seneschal," Marak began, "what other family members does Lord Quavry have?"

"Only his son," Pito answered. "His wife died five years ago and he had only one son. I had never met Mogry so I did not know who he was."

"Understandable," Marak responded. "I do not think Lord Quavry would be fool enough to send his son here if anyone knew what he looked like. Who would take over the Sorgan now if Quavry died?"

"I don't know," admitted the Seneschal. "I would have guessed Marshal Yenga, but he may be dead, as well, if he is no longer Marshal. I suppose there will be several contenders and some nasty battles before it is determined."

"What is the financial condition of the Sorgan, Kasa?" inquired Marak.

"They have always been healthy in finances," Kasa answered. "They have a very good yield each year and their expenses should be lower than Fardale's because they are not required to pay a portion to anyone. I think their cash reserves should be large."

"What about the strength of their army, Lectain?" queried Marak.

"Their army is larger than ours," offered Zorkil. "Marshal Yenga has long been considered one of the finest Marshals in Khadora and with him to lead the Sorgan Army, I would not give high odds to our survival. If he is dead and his successor is dead, maybe we will stand a chance. It is possible that their army will be disorganized by the deaths."

"Yet, moments ago you were ready to lead our men into battle against this superior force," interrupted Marak. "Why?"

"It is the proper thing to do," claimed Lectain Zorkil. "They have attacked us. We can not ignore the offense or they will attack us again."

Marak sat staring at the table for some time. He distantly heard the door open and close again, but paid no attention to it. Things were starting to look good for Fardale and he wasn't about to throw it all away on some border skirmish, yet he could not let the dispute fester, either. Suddenly, a solution popped into his head and he desperately wished for Fisher's knowledge.

"The Sorgan Marshal was Meltord," interrupted Lectain Zorkil. "The last we knew, he was a Lectain under Marshal Yenga. He is also a cousin to Lord Quavry and not very well liked by his men."

Lord Marak looked up and nodded. "Very well," he concluded. "It looks like Lord Quavry is running out of relatives."

"There is something else, Lord Marak," Zorkil continued. "Meltord was identified by a Priest of Sunnu who is inside the walls. Nobody remembers when he arrived and he said that he has been waiting all morning to talk with you."

Lord Marak was about to direct the Lectain to get rid of the priest when a nagging thought reversed his decision. "Okay," agreed Marak, "send him in. The rest of you may leave. If anything comes up that I should know about, Zorkil will inform me."

Marak watched the door expectantly as the Priest of Sunnu was ushered in. He managed to conceal his grin when he recognized Fisher despite the man's disguise.

"I have come to console you, my son," the priest began as the door closed.

"Console me later," smiled Marak. "Right now I want you to describe the layout of the Sorgan mansion. I plan to have a meeting with Lord Quavry tonight and I don't have an invitation."

"You are crazy," offered Fisher. "I will go in your place. He will be dead by morning."

"I don't plan on killing him," assured Lord Marak. "I plan on talking with him. Can you give me the details which I require?"

"It would be easier to kill him," Fisher replied while shaking his head. "I can detail every room in the Sorgan mansion. They had an insect infestation two years ago which I rectified for them. You are aware that he will not let you leave his mansion alive, aren't you?"

Lord Marak nodded and Fisher started drawing detailed diagrams of the Sorgan estate. The time passed quickly as Marak memorized the layout of the Sorgan mansion and he was surprised to find out the sun had set. He ordered a dinner for two and he dined quietly with Fisher. After dinner, the Priest of Sunnu was escorted through the main gate and Marak called for Lectain Zorkil.

"Lectain," announced Lord Marak, "I am going to see Lord Quavry tonight. "You are the only person inside Fardale to have this information. I hope to return sometime in the morning with a solution to our problem, but there is a chance that I will not."

"Lord Marak," interrupted Zorkil, "you can not trust Lord Quavry. I know you intend on getting some settlement which will avoid bloodshed, but he will have you killed."

"That is not part of my plan," confided Marak. "I am telling you so that no one else will discover that I am gone. If I should not return, the people of Fardale are to resist any attempts by anyone who tries to bring them under his control. That includes Lord Ridak. Everyone here owes allegiance to me and me alone. I will not have these people enslaved again. If you must have leadership, I would suggest the Council of Advisors. Let Fardale be Khadora's first cooperative estate. Bursar Kasa and Seneschal Pito, if they work together, can run the estate quite well."

"This talk is very depressing, My Lord," sighed Zorkil. "There is no one who can replace your leadership. Fardale is alive with hope for the very first time. I hear the talk of the soldiers and the workers. There is not one among them who would not die for you. Whatever your plan, let me go in your stead."

"This can only be accomplished by myself," declared Lord Marak. "You have much to learn yet, Lectain. I did not want to mention this in front of the Council, but you have to start thinking logically, instead of thinking as Khadora expects you to. Your reaction to the attack this morning was what Lord Quavry expects. Never, never, do what your enemy expects. I do not mean this as a rebuke. You are one of the finest officers I have ever met and you are going to be a very valuable asset to me. Now, after I change my clothes, I need your help in getting outside the walls undetected."

Lectain Zorkil saluted smartly as Lord Marak rose and made his way to his suite. He donned his blacksuit and checked the contents of his field bag before returning to the Meeting Chamber. He paced the floor as he waited for the Lectain to return and pondered the odds of his success for this risky mission.

Lectain Zorkil opened the door slightly and squeezed into the room. He stood for a moment staring at Lord Marak's blacksuit before speaking. "Everything is set," he reported. "In fact, I discovered that someone else has been leaving the estate through devious means. There is a small gate in the side wall which had a cord attached to the latch. I have reassigned the men posted there for the next hour. No one will see you leave. How will you be returning?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead," admitted the Lord of Fardale. "Through the main gate should be sufficient. Give orders not to shoot at any single individual approaching the main gate. It would not do to have my own men kill me."

Marak grabbed his field bag and headed for the door. Zorkil got there first and peered out to see if anyone was walking by. Quickly and quietly, the two men exited the mansion through a servants entrance and made their way to the small gate. The Lectain held the gate open as Lord Marak passed through and melded with the night.

Marak padded through the dark woods in a curving route, which took him well away from the areas where there might be Sorgan sentries. The unfamiliar terrain required extra care as Marak made his way into Watula Valley. He was not in a hurry and paused often to listen to the night sounds, always alert for the unmistakable sounds of humans. It took several hours just to get to the point where he could see the broad fields of watula waving gently in the night breeze. The Sorgan watula was higher than any grown in Fardale except for those fields, which the Kywara shaman had treated.

Marak crouched alongside the first field of watula and listened to the sound of a marching patrol. He had no idea what route the patrols would run and would have to depend on his stealth to get him to the mansion. Marak moved off in a crouching run along the border of the field and heard the patrol becoming more distant. He kept to the perimeter of the fields until he was on the side of the mansion opposite the Fardale border. If the Sorgan Army had a decent Marshal commanding it, these back fields would be

patrolled as well, but Marak was hoping that the patrols would be few.

For another couple of hours, Marak worked his way towards the mansion, avoiding the roving patrols, which became more numerous as he got closer to the building. Lord Marak did notice that there were no patrols around the mansion itself. Instead, there were guards posted at each of the entrances. Marak crossed the small clearing between the last watula field and a small orchard, which adjoined the rear courtyard of the mansion. Once there, he silently scrambled up into an apple tree and settled in for the wait.

Marak observed the guards on the mansion and the movements in the rooms, which were still illuminated. He wondered how Lord Quavry accepted the fact that there was no Situ retaliation attack. He was probably furious that the Situ did not react as he expected. He wouldn't be too happy over the loss of his cousin, either.

Movement around the mansion caught Marak's eye as a patrol rounded the corner of the mansion. Discipline was well maintained as the patrol stopped at each guard location to replace the sentries with fresh guards. The guards, themselves, were less polished. Once the patrol was out of sight, some of them relaxed and leaned up against the mansion. Marak gave them another two hours to get bored with their duty before he slipped down out of the tree.

Marak estimated that he had about an hour before the sky started to lighten and knew it was time to visit Lord Quavry. Moving quietly, Marak made his way through the orchard to a corner of the mansion. The guards on each side were distant from this corner of the building and Marak blended well with the dark night. Marak chose the side with the more distant sentry and reached up to feel the first shutter. It was properly locked and the warrior silently cursed his luck. Reaching into a pouch, he extracted a long, thin piece of black metal and tried to work it in between the shutters. The shutters were a tight fit and it took several minutes for Marak to work the smooth metal into place. He froze as the metal made contact with the latch and produced an ear-splitting snick as the latch swung free. He glanced at the sentry and realized that the noise was only loud to himself. The sentry remained bored and unaware of the intrusion.

Watching the guard carefully, Marak swung the shutter open and pulled himself up into the waiting room. Quickly closing the shutters, he listened for any cries of alarm or shouts from the sentries. After a moment of silence, he breathed easier. Marak crossed the room and placed his ear to the door leading out into the rest of the mansion. When he didn't hear anything, he cracked the door open and peered into the darkness. Nothing appeared to be moving inside the mansion and Marak exited the room and headed for the Lord's suite.

As Marak approached a corner in the corridor, he heard someone coming and swiftly opened a door and ducked into a room. The layout of the mansion flashed through his head as he struggled to remember which room this was. A heavy snoring emanated from the sleeping chamber adjoining the room and he remembered it as the Seneschal's suite. He listened to the door as the footsteps continued walking by. He counted silently to himself to estimate how long it would take for the person outside to reach the next corridor. For safety, he added a count of twenty to his estimate and cracked the door open.

Time was running out as Marak stepped into the corridor and closed the door to the Seneschal's suite. Shortly, the entire mansion would get up and begin their day. Quietly, he made his way to Lord Quavry's suite. Again pressing his ear to the door, he listened for noises indicating someone was awake. Satisfied that no one was walking around on the other side, Marak opened the door and walked in.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 13

Black Visitor

Lord Marak stood in the dark sitting room of Lord Quavry's suite and saw the first lightening of the morning sky through the window shutters. Silently, he crossed the carpeted room and stood at the door to the Lord's sleeping chamber. Quietly, he eased the door open and peered inside. Lord Quavry's sleeping chamber was dark and Marak could see very little. The black clad warrior eased himself into the room and closed the door behind him. The scent of jasmine hung in the air and Marak could just make out the shapes of two lumps on the large bed.

Cautiously, Marak drew his double-edged sword from his back-mounted sheath and held it before himself as he eased towards the window. Still facing the bed, Marak reached behind himself and unlatched the shutters. Gently swinging the shutters open, he allowed the early morning light to splay across the room. Marak's eyes focused on the rotund form of Lord Quavry lying next to a young woman. The woman's brown hair fell across her face as she turned to face the window and her green eyes opened wide as she stared at the black clad visitor and his large sword.

Marak held a finger to his lips and then motioned for the woman to get out of the bed. Marak looked on the floor next to the bed and saw the woman's clean brown tunic, indicative of a slave in Khadora. As the young woman slid her lithe body out from under the sheets, Marak lifted her tunic from the floor with the tip of his sword and held it out to her. She quickly snatched her tunic and drew it over her head without taking her eyes off of the dark invader. Marak pointed to the corner of the room and the young slave backed warily into it and lowered herself to the floor.

Once Marak was satisfied that she was safely out of the way, he extended the tip of his sword under the sheets of Lord Quavry's bed and flicked the fine, white cloth onto the floor. Lord Quavry awoke with a start and Marak swiftly placed the point of his sword at the Sorgan Lord's throat. Lord Quavry's mouth opened and he uttered a gurgling sound while his enlarged eyes darted back and forth across the room.

"If you try to speak over a whisper," the black clad warrior declared, "I'm afraid you won't get the chance to finish your first syllable."

"Who are you?" Lord Quavry croaked. "What do you want?"

"Why, I want to talk to you, of course," whispered Marak. "Why did you order the murder of women and children in Fardale yesterday?"

Lord Quavry's eyes started flicking left and right again as if he sought some unseen help. "I don't know what you are talking about," lied Lord Quavry. "If Marak has hired you for revenge, I'll double what he is paying you. You have my promise on that."

"Your promise?" Marak chuckled softly. "A promise from a man whose lies roll off his tongue as easily as yours do would not be worth very much to me. I really don't want to take the time to repeat my questions, Lord Quavry, so from now on you will tell the truth or I shall be forced to end our conversation abruptly."

"Look," shook Lord Quavry, "you will never get off this estate alive without my help. Tell me who you are and what you want and I will allow you to leave."

Marak increased the pressure on his sword and the blade bit into Lord Quavry's neck producing a trickle of blood. "I got in all right and I'll leave in the same condition," assured Marak. "Start answering my question now."

Lord Quavry's jaw grew rigid and his lips pressed tightly together. His eyes squinted as his hatred fell on the black clad warrior with a piercing glare. "The Situ have been infringing on our border," spat Lord Quavry. "I sent my men to warn them to stay clear of Sorgan lands."

Marak increased the pressure on his blade and a fairly rapid trickle of blood cascaded from Lord Quavry's throat to the bed.

Lord Quavry gasped and held up his hand in a pleading gesture. "All right!" the Sorgan Lord wheezed. "Stop with the sword. I'll tell you what you want to know. I had information that Marak was weak, the son of a slave put into position in Fardale to help Lord Ridak avoid the embarrassment of failed contracts. I knew if I could provoke Fardale into attacking Watula Valley that I would be rid of the Situ for good, but it didn't work. Marak must be weaker than I was told. My men slaughtered a whole field of workers yesterday morning and he has not retaliated."

"Why didn't you just attack Fardale and be done with it?" asked Marak.

"Attacking Fardale without provocation would be too risky," admitted Lord Quavry as his eyes searched for the slave woman who had shared his bed for the evening. He could not see her in the room and he couldn't remember if he had asked to be awakened this morning. Surely, someone will come to him before this madman kills him...

"If I attacked Fardale without provocation," Lord Quavry continued, "Lord Ridak would retaliate for sure, but if his stooge had provoked me, he would probably not press the matter."

"Now that Fardale hasn't attacked," questioned Lord Marak, "what do you plan to do about it?"

Lord Quavry stared at the black clad warrior's hand on the hilt of his sword and decided not to test the man's knowledge of Sorgan affairs. "We will attack Fardale this morning," offered the Sorgan Lord. "It would have been better if Marak had attacked us, but we can not wait any longer. This whole affair must be over this morning."

"Why the time constraints?" demanded Marak. "Your bandits have Fardale sealed off from Lituk Valley and they can not get word to bring reinforcements."

Lord Quavry frowned at the mention of his bandits. He simply could not determine how little information would satisfy the madman, but it went against his very nature to reveal everything. Still, the warrior appeared to be getting impatient and Lord Quavry would ensure that he never lived long enough to use his information.

"I have already filed a grievance with the Lords Council about the Situ transgressions," clarified Lord Quavry. "There will be a mediator here today or tomorrow. He must not find out that there has been no border dispute. Do you understand now?"

"What does Lord Burdine and the Litari Clan have to do with this scheme?" queried Marak.

Lord Quavry's eyes flickered shut for a moment and Marak could hear the sharp intake of breath. "Lord Burdine has also lodged a grievance," sighed Lord Quavry. "I thought it would make my case to the

Lords Council seem better if Fardale was doing the same to its other neighbors. He has nothing to do with the attack, but I have promised him an end to the right of passage for the Ragatha Clan. I assume that Lord Burdine will attempt to strangle the Ragatha into abandoning their lands here."

"A very clever plan," smiled Lord Marak, "but you never thought that you might be captured by Fardale before it was over, did you?"

Lord Quavry tried to rise in anger and winced as Marak's sword cut deeper into his neck. "Captured?" he gasped sardonically. "I am in my own bed in Watula Valley. You haven't captured anybody. Where is Marak's Army? All he did was send an assassin to my home. Nobody would consider this a capture. This isn't the way things are done in Khadora."

"Well," smiled Marak, "the way I see things may be different, but you are either captured or you are dead. Which would you prefer, Lord Quavry?"

Sweat started pouring off of Lord Quavry's face as he contemplated his options. Everyone heard the door to Lord Quavry's suite shut and the Sorgan Lord's face broke into a grin. The grin quickly faded as Marak withdrew one of his belt knives with his free hand and waited for the inner door to open. At the sound of knocking on Lord Quavry's inner door, Marak stared at the overweight Lord as if daring him to speak.

When no one answered the knocking, the door opened and an officer wearing the Marshal plume of Sorgan walked in. He stood open-mouthed in the doorway as his eyes darted back and forth between Lord Quavry and the tall stranger with the sword and throwing knife.

"Please be so kind as to close the door, Marshal," invited Marak. "Lord Quavry and I are having a wonderful conversation and we would like you to join us. Place your weapons on the floor ... slowly."

The new Marshal started when he saw the slave girl huddled in the corner, but he dutifully lowered his weapons to the floor.

"If you would stand across the bed from me," ordered Marak, "it would make me feel more comfortable."

Marak held his throwing knife poised as the officer moved into the requested position. "Who are you and how did you get in here?" demanded the Marshal.

"I would prefer to keep the conversation limited to answers to my questions," smiled Marak. "Lord Quavry was just about to make a decision on retirement as Lord of Sorgan. I know this matter will be of great interest to you, so please stand there and be quiet. Now, Lord Quavry, you were about to decide if you were properly captured by the enemy or not. Have you made your decision?"

"What would it matter?" asked Lord Quavry. "You do not wear the green and yellow of the Situ and I am the only one you have captured. So you win the enslavement of an old man, so what? My son will assume leadership of the Sorgan Clan and Fardale will still be wiped out. If that makes you take your sword out of my throat, I will submit. Are you satisfied?"

"Almost," stated Marak. "I want to hear you offer your Vows of Service to Lord Marak and I want to hear it now."

"Impossible," wheezed Lord Quavry. "The Vows are not binding unless they are given to the Lord in

question. You will have to bring Lord Marak here to get your wish."

"I don't have to do anything," smiled Marak. "I want to hear you offer the Vows and I want to hear them now. You can complain later about their authenticity."

Lord Quavry did not miss the reference to complaining later. If this madman heard what he wanted, he really did mean to let Lord Quavry live and that was enough to offer hope to the Sorgan Lord. "Very well," stated Lord Quavry.

Marak watched the expression on the Sorgan Marshal's face as his Lord recited the Vows of Service. The face was stony with a mask of indifference and its eyes were fixed on Marak's every movement. Marak could feel the tension in the Marshal as he stood poised to leap at the stranger at any moment.

When Lord Quavry had completed his Vows, Marak fixed his stare on the Marshal. "It is your turn, Marshal," instructed Marak, "and I would like to know your name."

"I am Marshal Patoga of the Sorgan Clan," uttered the officer, "and I will not offer Vows of Service to Lord Marak. I am already sworn to Lord Quavry and I do as he bids me to."

Marak nodded at the officer's proper response. "Lord Quavry," he ordered, "you will instruct your Marshal to utter the Vows to Lord Marak."

Lord Quavry could care less about the officer's Vows. He had just been subjected to the humiliation of giving them. Why shouldn't Marshal Patoga suffer, as well? Besides, the Vows were worthless, anyway. "Do it," ordered Lord Quavry.

Marshal Patoga shook his head as he uttered the Vows of Service to Lord Marak. When the Marshal had completed the Vows, he fixed Marak with a stare. "The Vows which I have just recited are worthless until they are given to Lord Marak personally," he intoned. "Unless you plan on taking us to Fardale, we are no closer to a resolution of this situation than we were when I entered the room. You will never get Lord Quavry or myself out of the mansion and I am sure that Lord Marak will not offer to come here to receive our Vows. Why don't you put the sword away and I will promise you a quick and painless death?"

"That is very gracious of you, Marshal," smiled Marak. "If I can arrange for these Vows to be given to Lord Marak directly, can you be counted on to honor them?"

"The Vows of Service are sacred," lectured Marshal Patoga. "There is not one man on the Sorgan estate who would dispute that. If Lord Quavry gives his Vows to Lord Marak in person, Watula Valley will follow Lord Marak. Now, seeing as you can not accomplish that miracle, your fun is over. I demand that you surrender immediately or I will sound the alarm."

"If you sound the alarm," retorted Marak, "the three of us will die needlessly. You have given your word, Marshal Patoga, and I accept it. There is one thing you should be aware of before I remove my sword from Lord Quavry's throat. I am Lord Marak of Fardale."

The Marshal's jaw dropped and Lord Quavry screamed as he unintentionally cut himself further on Marak's blade. Marak swiftly withdrew his sword from Lord Quavry's throat, but he did not return it to its sheath as he heard running footsteps approaching the Lord's suite. Two men burst into the room and Marshal Patoga quickly shouted for them to halt.

"Kill him," shouted Lord Quavry. "I demand that you kill him now."

The two men raised their swords, but Patoga shouted for them to stop. "Lord Quavry can not order you to kill this man," the Marshal stated. "If you act on Lord Quavry's delirious words, you will be making him break his Vows of Service which I, myself, heard him utter. Leave us. Wait in the outer room until we call for you."

Throughout the exchange Marak stood poised to act. His first swing would end the rule of the Sorgan Clan and the rest would take as many of the Sorgan soldiers as he was able to. Lord Quavry continued ranting and calling for Marak's death as Marshal Patoga inserted himself between his men and Lord Marak. After he ushered his men into the sitting room, Marshal Patoga closed the door and leaned against it.

"I am sorry, Lord Marak," declared Marshal Patoga, "but I must require proof of your identity before I can allow you to leave this room. If you are not Lord Marak, you will not leave this room alive."

Lord Quavry was hysterical and had scooted off the bed and was cringing in the corner next to his slave mistress. Marak shook his head in disgust as he turned to face Marshal Patoga.

"Of course, Marshal," agreed Marak. "I am sure that you have had people spying on Fardale for the Army. Bring one of them to this room."

"Mogry would know," cried Lord Quavry. "Send for my son."

Marak looked at the Marshal and shook his head. "Mogry was killed yesterday morning by your other spy, Tachora. I'm afraid you will need to rely on one of the Army spies."

Marshal Patoga opened the door and gave instructions to one of his men. He closed the door and returned his gaze to Lord Marak. "Why would Tachora kill Mogry?" he asked.

"I announced my decision not to retaliate with an attack on Watula Valley and he grew desperate," replied Marak. "I also informed him that I knew about his dealings with Lord Quavry. He stated that the death of Mogry would force me to act because it was provocation enough for Lord Quavry to order an attack."

"I always thought the man a fool," nodded Marshal Patoga. "I trust Tachora is dead, as well?"

"Certainly not," smiled Marak. "He is alive to present testimony about Lord Quavry's dealings. I understand that mediators from the Lords Council will be here soon."

A knock on the door interrupted the discussion and the Marshal opened it to allow a soldier in. The soldier stood there with an open mouth and eyes as large as eggs as he stared at Lord Marak. "Lord Marak?" he exclaimed. "Here in Watula Valley?"

Patoga shook his head as he shoved the soldier back out the door with orders to remain in the next room. "My men will have much to learn from you, Lord Marak," Patoga smiled. "If I may, I would suggest that you allow me to assemble my men for the issuance of their Vows to you. I would also like to get a doctor for Lord Quavry."

"Don't you need Lord Quavry's order to assemble the men?" questioned Lord Marak.

Marshal Patoga shook his head as he gazed at the blubbering hulk in the corner. "I have given you my Vows and I have witnessed Lord Quavry do the same," he clarified. "I also witnessed Lord Quavry break those very Vows by ordering your death. All Sorgans already owe their allegiance to you because by capturing Lord Quavry, you have captured the Sorgan Clan. You are within your rights to strike him dead and the Sorgan will follow you. If he objects to my men taking the Vows, I suggest that you do exactly that. The man is without honor."

Lord Marak nodded as the Marshal left the room. Marak stepped over and extended his hand to the young slave girl, helping her to get up off the floor. "I think you will look much prettier in a different color tunic," smiled Marak. "Why don't you go get cleaned up and find a quiet place to recover from this unfortunate incident?"

The woman pushed her errand curls back as she smiled up at Lord Marak. "Is it true that you have freed the slaves in Fardale?" she asked.

Lord Marak bestowed a fatherly smile on the young girl and nodded. "As they will be freed here in Watula Valley, as well," he added. "No one will force you to do what is not right anymore. Go, get cleaned up."

The young girl smiled and bowed as she left and the door closed. He barely spared Marak a glance as he hurried to Lord Quavry's side. Marak opened the door and left the doctor to his work. In the sitting room was an assemblage of plumed officers and Marshal Patoga was in the center of them giving instructions. The officers immediately stiffened and saluted their new Lord. Marak allowed the Marshal to orchestrate the ceremony and all of the high level officers recited their Vows of Service to Lord Marak.

Marak insisted that the Marshal keep a written log of each swearing and while the Marshal thought the order was superfluous, he complied. Each Cortain left immediately after swearing his Vows to assemble his own men. As the soldiers of the Sorgan Army were swearing their Vows to Lord Marak, the new Lord of Watula Valley was scribbling a note of his own. He gave the note to Marshal Patoga and ordered that it be delivered by a single man into the hands of Lectain Zorkil in Fardale. The note explained that Marak was safe and that there would be no war with the Sorgans. He further instructed that Fardale return to normal duties and instructed Cortain Tagoro to return to Watula Valley with the messenger.

After the Sorgan Army had been processed, Marshal Patoga arranged for the rest of the Sorgan Clan to recite their Vows. The last to be processed were the slaves and Lord Marak of Watula Valley declared each a free man after he recited his Vows of Service. The very last presented to Lord Marak was the slave called Yenga.

"I thought you were dead," stated Lord Marak. "Why is it that you are a slave and not the Marshal of the Sorgan Clan?"

"I broke my Vows of Service to Lord Quavry," admitted Yenga. "I refused a direct order."

"How, then, can I trust you will not do the same for the Vows you have just sworn to me?" posed Marak.

"I will do no different, My Lord," conceded Yenga. "If you utter the same order as Lord Quavry did, my answer will be the same."

"What was this order that was so grievous that you were willing to forfeit your freedom?" asked Lord Marak.

"Lord Quavry ordered me to command my men to attack your innocents as they worked a barren field, Lord Marak," Yenga replied stiffly. "I have been a soldier all of my life and I have never disobeyed an order, but I was not trained to kill innocents. A soldier fights other soldiers, not women and children."

"Then you should be a soldier again," smiled Lord Marak. "You are a free man and I would be pleased to have you in my Army. I have long heard tales of your strategic brilliance even in Lituk Valley. You have a reputation for outmaneuvering, outthinking and outguessing much larger forces than your own. I would be honored to have you serve as my Lord Marshal."

"Stories of Squad Leader Marak have reached my ears, as well," complimented Yenga. "You show leadership qualities and personal skills which rival the best soldiers in the land, but you have declared me a free man and that is how I wish to remain. I should think you have been in the Army long enough to realize that you can not have a Lord Marshal. You may have an opening for a Marshal in Fardale, but a Lord Marshal is the head of a Clan Army. That position in the Situ Clan is already held by Lord Marshal Grefon and even if it was open, the authority to fill it resides with Lord Ridak, not you."

"You are correct in your analysis," smiled Lord Marak. "Still, that does not explain your refusal to serve in the Army. You have devoted your life to soldiering and you are the best. You can not expect me to believe that you are going to become a farmer. Why do you refuse to serve in my Army? Do you disapprove of my reforms or is it me, personally, that you wish to avoid serving?"

"Quite the contrary," grinned Yenga. "Your moves here in Watula Valley will be the food of songsters for generations to come and the reforms you have started in Fardale will shock the entire nation. No, I heartily welcome your reforms and they almost tempt me to join with you, but I have tasted life as a slave. It was not a long period of enslavement, but I have felt the despair that is part and parcel of a slave's life. I will never return to that station in life and serving in the Army is an open trench waiting for my body."

"You fear death?" Marak asked unbelievably.

"Not death," corrected Yenga, "slavery. If I serve again, I will once again refuse an order and I do not wish to be returned to slavery. As a free man, I will never be forced into making such a refusal."

"But I would never ask such a thing of you," protested Lord Marak. "I like to think that I am a man of reason. If you find an order so objectionable that you would offer your freedom to refuse it, do you not think that I will listen to your arguments?"

"I do not think you would ever suggest an order which I would refuse," declared Yenga, "but there are others above you who would. Lord Ridak is no different than Lord Quavry and I can not serve him as part of the Army."

"You underestimate me," clarified Lord Marak. "I can guarantee you that, as my Marshal, you will never be subject to orders from Lord Ridak or Lord Marshal Grefon. You will owe no allegiance to them. I have been given absolute control over Fardale. You would take orders from no one but myself."

"Is this true of all the people at Fardale and Watula Valley?" questioned Yenga.

"Every last one," grinned Lord Marak. "Lord Ridak can only attempt to control me, not my people. Will

you serve as my Marshal?"

"With pleasure," beamed Yenga. "In fact, you may find that I have some suggestions for taking your reforms further. You may regret this day, Lord Marak. My reforms will certainly incense Lituk Valley."

"Let them scream," chuckled Lord Marak as he reached out and clasped Yenga's forearms. "Let them scream so loud that the whole nation sits up and takes notice."

A soldier ran forward and interrupted the discussion. "Lord Marak," he panted, "scouts report that the emissary from the Lords Council is only hours away. He will be here before nightfall."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 14

Burdine

The messenger's report regarding the impending arrival of the mediator from the Lords Council broke up the conversation between Lord Marak and Yenga, the new Marshal of Fardale. "Yenga, get dressed in your old uniform," ordered Lord Marak. "I have a mission for you."

Marak left a confused Yenga standing in the courtyard and strode off to find Marshal Patoga. He found the Marshal of Watula Valley organizing a festival to honor their new Lord.

"Marshal Patoga," addressed Lord Marak, "I need to talk with you."

Patoga quickly snapped off a series of orders to his men and joined Lord Marak in an area free of listeners. "Yes, Lord Marak, how may I serve you?" greeted Marshal Patoga.

"I have taken the liberty of making Yenga the Marshal of Fardale," began Lord Marak. "I have ordered him to don his old uniform for now and I wish you to assign him a Squad of Watula Valley soldiers. I know this is unusual, but it is necessary. I do want to confirm my intention to retain you as Marshal of Watula Valley."

"Lord Marak," Marshal Patoga replied, "I have served under Marshal Yenga for many years. While I feel that I am qualified for the position of Marshal of Watula Valley and am grateful for the chance to prove my abilities, I would have no objection to serving under Marshal Yenga again. He is truly my superior in all respects and it is an honor to serve under his command."

Marak nodded as he smiled. "You have already proven that you have the abilities of a good Marshal, Patoga, and I have need of a Marshal in Fardale. In a sense, you will get both of your wishes. As Marshal of Watula Valley, you will treat Marshal Yenga of Fardale as a Lord Marshal."

"But the Situ already have a Lord Marshal," objected Patoga, "Lord Marshal Grefon."

"Watula Valley does not belong to the Situ Clan," grinned Marak. "It belongs to me. The Sorgan Clan shall continue as a separate entity, but its people owe their allegiance to me."

Marshal Patoga's face creased with confusion. "A Clan without a Lord?" he queried. "A Clan who owes their allegiance to a Situ Lord, but who are not Situ? I do not understand."

"Maybe I should clarify my intentions," agreed Lord Marak. "I am the Lord of the Situ estate of Fardale.

The people of Fardale owe allegiance directly to me and not to Lord Ridak of Lituk Valley. This arrangement, although not common, is legal and acceptable. According to the pronouncement given to me by Lord Ridak, my people are only subject to Lord Ridak's orders through me. If his orders are not carried out, he has no legal complaint against my people. It is my intention to allow the Sorgan Clan to remain intact with a Lord to rule them, however, they will owe allegiance to me and only to me. If the Lord of Watula Valley does not obey me, I will replace him with another or order you to have him replaced."

"But if Lord Ridak rules you and you rule the Lord of Watula Valley," postulated Marshal Patoga, "then are not the people of Watula Valley subject to Lord Ridak of the Situ?"

"No," declared Lord Marak. "If I chose to defy Lord Ridak, the people of my Clans will defy him alongside me."

Realization of Lord Marak's intentions finally dawned on Marshal Patoga and he smiled broadly. Lord Marak might be subject to the legal control of Lord Ridak, but the head of the Situ Clan would tread carefully if Marak had considerable support and strength among his own people. Lord Marak might use that strength to argue with Lord Ridak and get his orders changed to something more acceptable.

"Yes, Lord Marak," grinned Patoga, "I do understand now, but who will be the Lord of the Sorgan Clan?"

"I am not sure," sighed Marak. "I plan on talking with Lord Quavry to see if he can agree to my demands and my methods of running an estate. If that does not work out, I would value your input on the matter. I would prefer to keep a Sorgan at the head of the Sorgan Clan, but whomever it is, you will ensure that there is no attempt to subvert my authority."

"You may count on me," assured Marshal Patoga. "My men will remain faithful to their true Lord no matter who heads the Sorgan Clan."

"Excellent," smiled Marak. "There are a few other matters which need to be taken care of quickly. The only members of the Sorgan Clan who have not given their Vows to me are the soldiers posing as bandits. They need to be relieved to attend to this matter immediately."

"The order to disband the bandits has already been given, My Lord," replied Patoga. "They will arrive here shortly."

"Good," remarked Marak. "There is also the problem of the emissary from the Lords Council. I understand that they are due here before nightfall. I want them delayed until morning. Perhaps we can use the bandits to slow them down and force them to spend another night on the road."

"That will not be easy," explained Patoga. "The emissary travels with a full Corte of Imperial troops. I take it that you do not wish the red and brown of the Sorgan Clan to be seen during the delaying tactics?"

"Nor the green and yellow of the Situ," nodded Lord Marak. "I do not wish to have the emissary attacked, just delayed. Perhaps the destruction of a key bridge or a forest fire will suffice. A delay of just a couple of hours would keep them from arriving until morning."

"I will see to it immediately," agreed Patoga.

"There is one more request and it may appear bitter to you," continued Marak. "Lord Burdine does not know what has happened here in Watula Valley. I intend to lure him in for talks with the emissary this evening. I am sending Yenga to fetch him with a Squad of red and brown under his command. He must not see you wearing the Marshal's plume when he arrives. His escort is to be entertained at the festival while he meets with me, but his men are to be kept in the dark. It will not be an easy task to keep your men from talking about the events of the day."

"I will see to it," Patoga stated proudly. "My men will ensure the ignorance of the Litari Soldiers. If I may ask, do I need to keep my men prepared for a Litari attack when Lord Burdine leaves?"

"Not if everything goes according to plan," stated Marak. "Still, watering the ale might be in order. At the very least, a Corte of Imperial troops will be arriving in the morning."

"All will be prepared as you have requested," saluted Marshal Patoga.

Marak heard Patoga issuing orders as he strode towards the mansion. Marshal Yenga was standing on the porch in his red and brown Marshal's uniform. Marak briefed him on his plan and sent him to gather his Squad from Marshal Patoga. Cortain Tagoro arrived with a change of clothes for Marak before Yenga had a chance to leave and Marak introduced Tagoro to his new Marshal.

"Marak," asked Tagoro as he accompanied his Lord to the Meeting Chamber where Marak could change into his Situ uniform, "what is going on? The Sorgan messenger would not say what had happened. He presented your note to Lectain Zorkil and would say no more."

"He was instructed to be vague," declared Marak. "The Sorgan Clan has sworn to me, but I do not want anyone to know just yet. We have found two spies at Fardale already and I cannot afford for there to be another until this whole escapade is over."

"How did you manage to do this?" queried Tagoro. "I thought Lord Quavry was ready to wipe out Fardale?"

"Come along with me," suggested Marak. "I am about to have a talk with Lord Quavry now."

Marak led the way to the Lord's suite and entered without knocking. There were two Sorgan guards in the sitting room and they snapped salutes as Lord Marak entered. Marak continued through the sitting room to the Lord's sleeping chamber and entered with Cortain Tagoro on his heels. Lord Quavry was in bed and the doctor was preparing to leave.

"Ah, Lord Marak," greeted the doctor. "Lord Quavry is much better now. I have given him something to soothe his nerves and there is no physical damage except for the small cut on his throat. He will be fine by tomorrow."

Marak nodded as the doctor left and he pulled a chair close to the bed. "I am glad to see that you are feeling better, Lord Quavry," commented Lord Marak.

"Why do you continue to call me Lord Quavry when you have already deposed me?" sighed the Sorgan Lord.

"Because I have not deposed you," smiled Marak. "I wish you to continue on as Lord of the Sorgans."

"Continue as Lord?" puzzled Quavry. "You have already sworn the entire Clan to your service. What is left for a Lord to do?"

"You are an important Lord in Khadora," explained Marak. "You are respected and feared and you hold a seat in the Assembly of Lords. Yes, I have taken the allegiance of the Sorgan Clan, but I do not intend for the Clan to die. The Sorgan will continue to be a separate Clan and will have its own Lord. If you do not wish the position, I am sure that I can find another who will take it."

Quavry stared at Lord Marak for what seemed to be a long time before finally speaking. "What authority would the Lord of the Sorgan have without the allegiance of his people?" Quavry asked.

"The people of Watula Valley must owe their allegiance to me," declared Lord Marak. "I will give the Lord of the Sorgan Clan wide leeway in running his estate, but there will be guidelines on proper conduct of the Sorgan people. If anything, the new Lord of the Sorgan will be more powerful than you ever were. Already the size of the available Army has doubled and it will grow larger. Fardale and Watula Valley can work together to increase the prosperity of both."

"All to the betterment of Lord Ridak," grumbled Quavry. "You are only Lord Ridak's pawn and now you want me to be your pawn. I fail to see how that betters my position."

"I am nobody's pawn," corrected Marak. "The Lord of Watula Valley will owe no allegiance to the Situ Clan, only me."

"For now," mused Quavry, "but once Lord Ridak finds out you plan to build your own empire, he will send his Army to crush you or bring in the Lords Council to declare all of your lands forfeit."

"Speaking of the Lords Council," smiled Marak, "what do you plan to do with their emissary when he arrives?"

Quavry's eyebrows rose in understanding. "If they learn what has happened here," he remarked, "Lord Ridak and his Army will be here within a week. Even our combined armies can not stand long against that."

"Do you wish to turn Watula Valley over to Lord Ridak or would you rather manage it in a reduced capacity," asked Lord Marak.

"Watula Valley has been the home to the Sorgan for countless generations," answered Quavry angrily. "I will not let that lituk sucking vermin infest this valley."

"You see," grinned Marak, "we share a common goal. I do not ask much of you as Lord of the Sorgan. All of your people must swear Vows of Service to me, all people will be treated with respect, and I will not stand for any subversive actions without my direct approval."

"You are generous with your enemies," suggested Quavry. "Had our positions been reversed, you would be dead. What will we do with Lord Burdine? The emissary will wish to talk with him, as well."

"We bring him into our fold," confided Marak. "Lord Burdine is already on his way here to meet with the emissary."

Lord Quavry nodded vigorously. "He is as guilty as I am," Quavry chuckled. "While I did not enjoy your victory over me, I will enjoy watching Burdine suffer the same fate. He will arrive with an escort,

though, and we can not conclude our business with the emissary watching."

"The emissary will be delayed until the morning," declared Lord Marak. "Burdine's escort will be welcomed to the festival currently going on outside. They will not, of course, be told the reason for the festival. They will assume it is a victory celebration for your defeat of the Fardale estate."

"You are more devious than I could hope to be," admired Quavry, "and yet you have not spoken a lie yet. What will you tell the emissary?"

"Nothing," chuckled Marak. "You will explain that we have come to a peaceful understanding of our dispute and you wish to retract your grievance."

Lord Quavry slipped out of bed and began dressing. "I can not say that I enjoy reporting to you, Lord Marak," Quavry said as he slipped on his clothes. "You are, however, going to make life interesting. If we can bring the Litari into our fold, we will have enough might to withstand Lord Ridak."

"More than that," added Lord Marak. "We will have enough of a position to start influencing Khadora. As I said before, your power and influence will be greater under me than it could ever possibly be alone."

"Then I would like to assume my position as Lord of the Sorgan, if you will permit me," requested Lord Quavry.

"You are a most welcome addition," granted Lord Marak. "I will meet you in the Meeting Chamber when Burdine arrives."

Marak turned and left the Lord of Watula Valley to his grooming needs. Cortain Tagoro shook his head as he followed Marak out of the room. Marak had often shared his personal feelings with his old friend, but he had never expounded on his plan to change the culture of Khadora. Tagoro felt as though he was seeing the true Marak for the first time and he liked what he saw.

Marak explained to Tagoro what his plan was while they waited in the Meeting Chamber. Tagoro nodded and smiled for half an hour before Lord Quavry arrived. Marak sent Tagoro off to Fardale with orders for Lectain Zorkil and then spent his time discussing strategy for the upcoming meeting with Lord Burdine.

Their scheming was just completed when the door opened and Lord Burdine and Marshal Yenga entered.

"I took the liberty of inviting our Litari guests to the victory celebration, My Lord," saluted Marshal Yenga.

Although the Marshal had purposely not specified which Lord he was addressing, Lord Quavry replied. "Thank you, Marshal Yenga. Lord Burdine, welcome to Watula Valley. Allow me to introduce Lord Marak of Fardale."

Lord Burdine scowled at Marak and extended his arms to greet Lord Quavry. "Lord Quavry, I see that you deliver on your promises," greeted the Litari Lord. "Where is the emissary from the Lords Council?"

"He has been delayed, I fear," smiled Lord Quavry. "I am sure he will be here by morning."

"Morning?" objected Lord Burdine. "Then why have you brought me here tonight?"

"I am afraid that is my doing," smiled Lord Marak. "I thought it would be best to talk about what you intend to tell the emissary before he actually arrived."

"Your doing?" howled Lord Burdine with a tone of incredulity. "I plan to tell them about your incursion into Glendale, home of the Litari. What else would I tell them?"

"You might try the truth," suggested Lord Marak, "although that may not bode well for you, will it?"

Lord Burdine cast suspicious glances at both Lord Marak and Lord Quavry. "What is going on here?" he demanded. "Why is Marak still alive to talk?"

"I am alive because I won the contest," grinned Marak. "The real question today is whether you wish to remain alive or not."

Lord Burdine heard Yenga's sword clearing its leather sheath and the blood drained out of his face. "You won?" quizzed Burdine. "How could you have won? This must be some kind of a joke, but I am not laughing. I have seen the victory celebration going on. I will not stand for being treated this way."

"But how should a liar be treated?" asked Marak. "You have sworn a grievance to the Lords Council and that grievance is false. I will swear that it is false. Lord Quavry will swear that it is false. Tachora will swear that it is false. In fact, every person in Fardale and Watula Valley will swear that it is false. What are your plans, Lord Burdine?"

Lord Burdine slid into a chair, leaned on the table and propped his head up with his hands. For several moments Burdine sat there staring at Lord Quavry while his eye twitched. "I want to know what happened here," he finally demanded. "I will not let Glendale fall into Situ hands."

"I do not need to go into a detailed explanation of what has occurred here in Watula Valley," declared Lord Marak. "What is important is that you are guilty of a most heinous crime and I can prove it. Your fate rests in my hands, but even my ability to ease your plight will be very limited when the emissary arrives. He will have no mercy for someone who has sworn a false instrument to him."

"So," spat Lord Burdine, "is it so much better to die at your hand than at the hand of the Lords Council? At least the Lords Council will not hand Glendale over to the Situ."

"Nor will I," promised Lord Marak. "I will claim the Vows of Service from every member of the Litari Clan as my just due for your transgression, but those Vows will be to me, not to the Situ Clan. You will be allowed to continue to rule in Glendale with a few minor restrictions."

"Rule?" growled Lord Burdine. "You mean for me to turn the entire Litari Clan over to you and you will humble yourself to allow me to be your puppet! I think not. Go ahead and kill me. I will not be a stooge for the Situ."

"You have little choice," declared Lord Marak. "If you will not agree to my terms, you will force me to subdue Glendale by force. With both Fardale and Watula Valley attacking, your Army will have little chance, especially when they are surprised."

"Lord Burdine," reasoned Lord Quavry, "listen to what he has to say. He is not claiming our lands for the Situ. He has promised that will never happen. I am remaining in control of Watula Valley and I think it will be better than before. Our Clans will survive and our seats in the Assembly of Lords will remain."

With the armies of our three estates combined, even Lord Ridak will be hesitant to bother us. Lord Marak's reforms are not odious. He has freed all of my slaves, but they are so jubilant that they may actually perform better. If the Lords Council gets involved in this, Glendale and Watula Valley may actually end up in Situ hands. Depending on how one looks at Lord Marak's position, Lord Ridak may actually claim a grievance against us, and win."

Lord Burdine looked curiously at Lord Marak as if seeing him for the first time. "Exactly what is your relationship to Lord Ridak?" Lord Burdine asked. "I understood that you are the son of a slave."

"That is correct," answered Lord Marak. "Lord Ridak has given me Fardale with absolute control. All of my people have sworn Vows of Service to me, but not to the Situ Clan. Lord Ridak's only control is through me and I promise you and the people of Glendale that I will never turn their allegiance over to the Situ. If we all work together, our combined influence will be far greater than the sum of our individual influence. I would like to get one of you seated on the Lords Council."

"You are asking me to turn my people over to you so I can have greater influence?" queried Lord Burdine. "You must take me for a child."

"Lord Burdine," lectured Lord Marak, "you have brought this situation upon yourself. Your greed and avarice sought to destroy Fardale. Do you think I should just forget the incident? I will have Glendale with or without you. The only difference will be whether or not the Litari Clan continues to survive as a distinct entity. If I have to take Glendale by force, it will become part of the Sorgan holdings. I would prefer that you stay alive to keep the heritage of the Litari from fading."

Marak caught a twinkle in Lord Burdine's eyes as the Litari Lord sat erect and addressed Lord Marak. "If I agree to have the Litari swear Vows of Service to you, Lord Marak," posed Lord Burdine, "what happens to the Litari when you die?"

"I actually thought that question would have come from Lord Quavry," chuckled Marak. "I have made provisions for everyone who has sworn to me to become free and unassociated people. That means that the Litari will continue as a Clan without a Clan Leader. I think that situation would not be as good as what I am proposing, but it would still be preferable to the way Khadora is run now. The short of it is, you will gain nothing by having me murdered."

"What about the Ragatha Clan?" asked Lord Burdine. "They have repeatedly attacked Glendale seeking a direct route to their other estate. I could have forced them to submit if it was not for your agreement to allow them passage. They seek to control this entire region."

"I hope they try," smiled Lord Marak. "They will find an army three times larger than they expect. As for the agreement with Fardale, they don't have one. Lord Lashendo and Bursar Tachora were bribed to allow for the agreement. Fardale never received any compensation for the use of Fardale land. We shall talk after the emissary leaves and discuss this matter. There are many good points to this union, Lord Burdine. If you put your emotions aside for a moment and look at it, I know you will agree."

"We made a poorly conceived attempt to crush Fardale," interjected Lord Quavry while feeling his throat. "I know how you are feeling right now. I am sure that I felt worse. The point is, we made the error and Lord Marak's offer is more than generous. We often talked of an alliance, but neither of us could fully trust the other. If Lord Marak is to be believed, and I think he is, we will end up better than before. Our three clans together present a force that can resist even the Ragatha."

"Or the Situ," added Lord Marak. "Are you so proud that you would cause the Litari to suffer because

of your pride?"

Lord Burdine looked back and forth between the other two Lords. "No," conceded Lord Burdine. "The last thing I want is for my people to suffer. If you, Lord Marak, will pledge to me that your thoughts will always be for the people of the Litari Clan and not your own personal goals, I will agree. If you can not do that, you shall have to kill me."

"Lord Burdine," smiled Marak, "that is exactly what I am about. I have no personal goals. I am using the opportunities that have been presented to me to make life better for all Khadorans, including the Litari."

"What are the reforms you will demand?" asked Lord Burdine.

"I will free your slaves and ask that you provide them decent housing and living conditions," detailed Lord Marak. "I will require your mages and soldiers to undergo specific training, and I want you to willingly accept input from your people, even the lowest of them. I also insist that no one trespasses on Chula land."

"Those are your reforms?" Lord Burdine asked incredulously. "Freeing the slaves may hurt a bit, but training my people is something they will readily accept. As for the Chula, we learned that lesson ourselves the hard way. If that is what you are asking of me, Lord Marak, you have a willing servant."

"Great!" exclaimed Lord Marak. "I want to accomplish the Vows of Service before morning. When the emissary arrives we can jointly tell them we have solved our differences."

"I will give my Vows now," declared Lord Burdine. "After you have accepted the Vows from my escort, they will take you to Glendale to complete the process."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 15

Emissary

Lord Marshal Grefon hurried into Lord Ridak's study where the Lord of Lituk Valley was plowing through a pile of reports.

"Lord Ridak," interrupted Lord Marshal Grefon, "I think we have a problem."

Lord Ridak was annoyed at the interruption. He hated going through the reports, but the less interruptions he had, the sooner he would be done with the task. "What is it Grefon?" snarled the Lord of the Situ Clan. "Has another of your runners been killed by bandits?"

"Not exactly," stiffened the Lord Marshal. "I thought you might be interested in a report from one of our couriers. He ran into a Corte of Imperial troops escorting an emissary from the Lords Council."

The statement piqued Lord Ridak's interest. It was not often that anyone from the Lords Council came this far from the capital. "Where was he heading?" Lord Ridak inquired.

"He was bound for Watula Valley," offered Lord Marshal Grefon. "There is trouble with a border dispute involving the Sorgan and Litari Clans."

Lord Ridak knew that border disputes in those frontier lands were continual, but they seldom involved a mediator from the Lords Council. Normally they were resolved by force with little recourse to the loser. "So, the Sorgan and Litari are fighting over their border," commented Lord Ridak. "It is unusual for them to request a mediator, but it is not something that requires my immediate attention. At least let me finish these infernal reports and we can discuss the ramifications of your information."

"They are not squabbling between themselves," insisted Lord Marshal Grefon. "They are squabbling over Fardale. Both Clans have filed grievances with the Lords Council over Fardale transgressing their borders."

"What?" shouted Lord Ridak. "What is that fool of yours doing? I have plans to expand Fardale next year and I do not want a decree from the Lords Council to set the boundaries in stone. This is all your fault, Grefon. I would have been better off leaving Fardale without a Lord than sending in some child who starts a war with his neighbors as soon as he gets there."

"That is the part I don't understand," admitted Lord Marshal Grefon. "Marak is not the aggressive type. He is an excellent warrior and a natural born leader, but he has always given the enemy too much leeway. I cannot believe that he is pushing his boundaries into either of the other Clans."

"What are you suggesting?" quizzed Lord Ridak. "Why else would the Sorgans and Litari file grievances with the Lords Council?"

"I don't know," conceded Grefon. "Neither of them is a member of the Lords Council, so the request for a mediator indicates that the grievance is severe and could lead to regional conflict."

"Perhaps," suggested Lord Ridak, "they are afraid that Marak will call on us for help. Neither of them could hope to stand up to the Situ Clan."

"Even if they worked together," declared Lord Marshal Grefon, "they would not stand a chance against us and they know it. I am concerned that the bandits who have been blocking our communications might not be bandits at all."

"Wait just one minute," interrupted Lord Ridak. "What do the bandits have to do with what we are talking about? Stay on one problem at a time, Grefon."

"I see it as the same problem," Grefon sighed exasperatingly. "If Watula Valley intentionally cut off our communications with Fardale and then filed a grievance about a border dispute with Fardale, what would that suggest to you?"

"That greedy son of a Sorgan!" exclaimed Lord Ridak. "Lord Quavry has goaded Marak into violating his border and now he is going to get official sanction for a new border advantageous to himself. Well, I will not sit by and allow this to happen. Ready the Army, Lord Marshal. We should have wiped out the Sorgans a long time ago."

"I don't think that is the answer," insisted Lord Marshal Grefon. "I know the Marshal of the Sorgan Clan, Marshal Yenga. He is a brilliant strategist and he would not be fool enough to be in the middle of a war when the emissary arrived. Whatever casualties Fardale has incurred, the battle is long over. What is important, though, is that we have a say in the negotiations with the emissary from the Lords Council. We can not allow Marak to bargain away our land."

"When will the emissary reach Watula Valley?" inquired Lord Ridak.

"There was a bridge collapse and they have been delayed," smiled Lord Marshal Grefon, "or they would have been there already. As it is, they will not get there until morning."

"Very well," advised Lord Ridak, "you will travel with the emissary to Watula Valley. You can leave immediately and ride until you reach their camp. With the Imperial escort, you will not need one of your own. You can bring back Marak's Corte as an escort when you return."

"As you command, Lord Ridak," Lord Marshal Grefon agreed as Lord Ridak scribbled a note and presented it to his Lord Marshal.

"This gives you my authorization to speak on my behalf regarding Fardale," Lord Ridak said. "Make sure my lands remain as they were before you talked me into putting your boy in charge."

Lord Marshal Grefon stiffened at the accusation and he saluted mechanically as he left. He nearly bumped into the Seneschal and a wealthy merchant as he exited the Lord's study. He mumbled an apology and made his way to his suite to prepare for his journey.

Lord Ridak sighed as he looked up at the new interruption, the Seneschal and some young merchant so bejeweled with gems that he appeared gaudy.

"Pardon the interruption, Lord Ridak," the Seneschal groveled, "but I have a most lucrative offer you should hear. This merchant has a market for mages. He is particularly interested in soil mages, but he is willing to consider whatever we have. We have negotiated price and he is willing to pay triple the going rate. I thought you should be notified."

Lord Ridak rubbed his greedy little hands together. He already had more mages than he needed, not that they were much good for anything, anyway. Most of the time they failed to live up to their abilities. If his conquest of Morgar was successful in the Fall, Lituk Valley would have more mages than he cared to house.

"That is an acceptable price," agreed Lord Ridak. "How many mages are you looking for?"

"As many as I can get, My Lord," grinned the merchant. "I have a fool client who values the prestige of owning mages more than his money."

"A fool, indeed," snickered Lord Ridak. "I will need to keep two of each discipline to make sure our crops are cared for, but you may purchase the rest. That will be a healthy number of mages. Are you prepared to pay for that many?"

"I am, indeed, My Lord," grinned the gaudy merchant. "I have taken the liberty of having your Seneschal draw up the documents for each of your mages. If you would care to sign them now, we can retire to his office and conclude our business without the need to trouble you further."

Lord Ridak nodded absently as he took the pile of papers and started signing them. He suddenly paused as he was signing the document for the mage, Glenda, Marak's mother. He had planned on using her as leverage in case the young pup got out of hand. He rubbed his chin and thought for a moment. It was needless, he finally decided. No doubt, Lord Marshal Grefon would return with Marak's head in a basket, anyway. Still, just to make sure they were never reunited...

"These sales are conditional," declared Lord Ridak. "I will only allow the sale to go through if you promise that no one in Lituk Valley will know where you are taking the slaves. I do not want their future location known here."

"As you wish, My Lord," the merchant readily agreed. "I would not want anyone to know of my client, anyway. Some other merchant might find out about him and try to cut me out."

"Excellent," laughed Lord Ridak as he finished signing the pack of papers. "Remember to leave me two of each discipline. Destroy the remaining contracts after the merchant leaves."

"I will make sure of it," promised the Seneschal.

The Seneschal and the merchant bowed their way out of Lord Ridak's study and hurried back to the Seneschal's office. Lord Ridak returned to his reports with a smile on his lips. A healthy unexpected profit was always a delight to Lord Ridak. Even the trouble out at Fardale had a silver lining. With any luck at all, Lord Ridak would be rid of Marak and still not be blamed for the unfulfilled contracts. He could now point to the direct intervention of the Lords Council to attest to Marak's incompetence. It was too late in the growing season for anyone to expect him to recover the fields now. Lord Marshal Grefon would know how to handle the emissary and Lord Quavry.

Lord Marshal Grefon tied his pack to his horse and mounted for the ride to meet the emissary. He gazed at the commotion in the courtyard where the gaudy merchant was loading slaves into his four wagons. He recognized Marak's mother as one of the slaves who was being sold and sighed. Marak had been a good little soldier until he got involved with Fardale. Now, Grefon knew, Marak would deteriorate rapidly. His mother, Glenda, was probably the only thing that had kept Marak in tow. When he found out that she had been sold he would be livid. Well, Grefon did not have time to worry about the little people. He had to get himself out to Watula Valley and save the boundaries of his future estate and if Marak got crushed in the dealing, that was part of playing politics. He should have remained a good little soldier.

* * * *

Lord Zawbry of the Ragatha Clan sat in his study in Woodville. The Marshal of Woodville sat across the desk from him biting his nails. "Are you sure the emissary is heading for Watula Valley?" asked Lord Zawbry.

"I'm certain," answered Marshal Tingo. "The Imperial troops had nothing to hide. Whatever their mission, the entire nation will know about the affair in a few days, anyway. There is nothing secret about a Lords Council mediator. They freely told me about the border dispute. Both the Sorgan and the Litari claim to have had their borders violated by the new Lord of Fardale."

"This new Lord is young and could be impetuous," granted Lord Zawbry, "but he did not appear to be aggressive in your other reports."

"I doubt that he is," laughed Marshal Tingo. "This is typical behavior for the Litari. They hope to bully the young Lord into giving up concessions by bringing in the Lords Council. We know the Sorgan have blocked Marak's communication with Lituk Valley. That is probably why the Litari let the Sorgan in on the deal. The Litari territory is such that they could not block Marak's communications without Sorgan help."

"It is typical of the Litari," agreed Lord Zawbry. "They tried to pen us up in hopes that we would pick up and leave Woodville. Only the agreement with the Situ saved us. It is yet another reason for the Litari to go after the new Lord."

"What are we going to do about it?" inquired Marshal Tingo.

"Do?" puzzled Lord Zawbry. "Why should we do anything about it? We are not allies of the Situ. Let them deal with their own problems."

"Their problems could quickly become our problem," informed Marshal Tingo. "If the Litari gain some of Fardale, they may be able to shut off our access again. I am sure that is what they are after."

The Lord of Woodville stared at his desk and the Marshal was not sure if the Lord had heard him. "If we can't get through Fardale," continued Marshal Tingo, "we can not move our goods to market."

"I know, I know," snapped Lord Zawbry. "Give me a minute to think of the consequences of this situation."

Marshal Tingo nervously tugged at another nail and wished he was back in his office. Lord Zawbry became moodier every day. He wondered if something was bothering the Lord, something other than the Litari troubles.

"We can not allow the Litari to cut off our access to the rest of the world," decided Lord Zawbry. "Once the emissary makes his decision, it will be too late for us to act. We need to get a message to Lord Sevrin right away."

"Informing the Lord of the Ragatha Clan is an excellent idea," echoed Marshal Tingo, "but how will that help us with the Litari? The Situ have executed an agreement with us allowing for our access. Surely the mediator will not make any boundary changes which would affect that agreement."

"Of course he will," lectured Lord Zawbry. "That is the whole purpose of the mediation. That is precisely what Lord Burdine is after and he will fight to get it. If we get a message to Lord Sevrin, we can tell him to expect a message from us every ten days. If he does not receive a message during a ten day period, he will know that our access has been cut off and he will send troops to reopen it."

"I was more concerned with the Litari seizing all of Fardale," apologized Marshal Tingo. "I did not think of the Litari settling for a small strip which would deny us access."

"That is why I am the Lord and you are the Marshal," chided Lord Zawbry.

"If we have to attack the Litari to gain access to the outside," suggested Marshal Tingo, "we should push through the heart of Glendale rather than Fardale. Even though we will be fighting the Litari, the Situ in Fardale could get mixed up in the battle and we don't need another enemy."

"That makes sense," agreed the Lord of Woodville. "It would be better if we could attend the meeting with the emissary and ensure that our access stays open."

"Couldn't we attend as friends of Fardale?" asked Marshal Tingo. "There are two Lords ganging up on Fardale. I think our presence might help the young Lord avoid losing too much land."

"That is an excellent idea," granted Lord Zawbry. "Of course, I don't dare go myself. Putting myself in the mansion of the Sorgans is a sure way to lose more than we could gain by attending. You shall be Woodville's representative. Send that message off to Lord Sevrin and then go to Fardale and present yourself to the new Lord. Explain that you will accompany him to the meeting and speak on his behalf."

"I know little of politics," protested Marshal Tingo, "and I have no authority to speak for the Ragatha Clan."

"You do need any authority," explained Lord Zawbry. "Merely present yourself as a friend of Fardale and disparage the honor of the Litari Clan at every opportunity. That should be enough to sway the mediator."

* * * *

Lord Marak, Lord Quavry, and Lord Burdine stood on the porch of the mansion in Watula Valley and awaited the arrival of the emissary from the Lords Council. It had been a long night for all of them, but everyone in both Clans had sworn Vows of Service to Lord Marak. The soldiers of Glendale had sworn dutifully as their Lord had ordered them to. Interestingly, it was the woodsmen of Glendale that had grumbled, but they, too, eventually swore their allegiance.

Marshal Yenga still wore the red and brown of the Sorgan Marshal and stood talking with Marshal Garlo of Glendale who sported the brown and green colors of the Litari Clan.

A shout arose from the road leading into the Watula Valley estate and everyone stopped talking and stared in the direction the emissary would come from. Lord Marak's heart skipped a beat as he noticed the distinctive yellow and green plume of the Situ Marshal among the party heading towards the mansion.

"Lord Marshal Grefon has somehow attached himself to the emissary's party," Lord Marak announced. "Everyone must remember not to mention the Vows of Service today. We do not need a Situ attack at this moment."

"How could he have found out?" questioned Lord Burdine.

"Imperial troops who act as escorts often talk with the local commanders when they are on a mission which is not secret," clarified Marshal Yenga. "Anyone who asked them where they were going would have received the correct answer. I know Lord Marshal Grefon, Lord Marak. He will be poking around the estate trying to cull information from the men. He is inquisitive and persistent. He will also try to bully you into telling him everything."

"Make sure that the men do not reveal anything to him," ordered Lord Marak. "I will deal with him after we dispatch the emissary."

"We can not just dismiss the emissary," interrupted Lord Quavry. "We have requested his presence and even if we no longer require his services, he will likely stay a few days, anyway."

"I will leave the entertaining to you, Lord Quavry," replied Lord Marak. "I will take Lord Marshal Grefon back to Fardale and see that he gets the chance to return home quickly."

The Imperial troops marched to the front of the mansion and stopped. A distinguished looking gentleman with short, gray hair continued up the steps to the porch followed by Lord Marshal Grefon.

"I am Katzu," greeted the Lords Council mediator. "I have been selected to mediate your problem. Shall we adjourn to your Meeting Chamber, Lord Quavry?"

"Certainly, Katzu," Lord Quavry agreed and promptly led the way into the Meeting Chamber. Once there, Lord Quavry introduced everyone and they all sat at the large table.

"I am glad that you are here, Lord Burdine and Lord Marak," Katzu opened. "It will make my task easier to have all the parties available at the same time."

"Actually," stated Lord Quavry, "we no longer have any problem to mediate. Lord Marak, Lord Burdine, and myself have come to an amicable solution through our own negotiations. I am sorry that the solution took so long. I would have liked to save you the long journey into the frontier country."

Katzu looked at three Lords for some time as if trying to determine if their solution was truly amicable. "Do you concur, Lord Burdine?" he finally asked.

"Yes, Katzu, I do," declared Lord Burdine.

"And you, Lord Marak?" Katzu continued.

"Yes, Katzu, I am satisfied with the solution," Marak smiled.

"Very well, then," Katzu agreed. "The Lords Council does not interfere where they are not needed. Still, I think it would be wise for me to remain here for a few days in case anyone has a change of heart. It is a long journey from the capital. I trust that will not pose a problem to you, Lord Quavry?"

"Of course not," smiled Lord Quavry. "I will be honored to have you as my guest. Whatever you need will be provided."

"I would like to speak before you declare this matter to be closed, Katzu," demanded Lord Marshal Grefon.

Although it was obvious from the Lord Marshal's uniform that he was a Situ, Katzu asked the proper question. "Whose interest do you represent, Lord Marshal Grefon?"

"I represent the interests of the Situ Clan in matters pertaining to Fardale," declared Lord Marshal Grefon. "I demand to know what the settlement is that has been agreed to."

Katzu looked from one Lord to the next and no one offered to speak of the settlement. Finally his eyes remained on Lord Marak and waited for an explanation.

"As the Lord of Fardale," Marak began, "I am happy with the settlement agreed to. If the Lord Marshal of the Situ will accompany me to Fardale, perhaps I can satisfy his curiosity."

Katzu merely shrugged, but Lord Marshal Grefon turned red with anger. "I demand to be informed of the agreement," Grefon said with a steadily rising voice.

"Lord Marshal Grefon," scolded Lord Marak, "I am the Lord of Fardale and I do not wish to discuss my business in this forum. I do not recall your name on the invitation list for this meeting and I object to your presence here. You will kindly remove yourself from this room until I decide to inform you of the settlement."

Lord Burdine and Lord Quavry cringed from the verbal exchange, but Katzu simply sat and observed the demeanor of the participants. Lord Marshal Grefon rose, fully beet red in the face, and stared at Lord Marak.

"You insolent little Chula chip," scorned Lord Marshal Grefon. "Do you really think I will take orders from you? If you do not wish to disclose your secret arrangement that is a problem I can deal with. I have authority here from Lord Ridak, Lord of all Situ, in all affairs concerning Fardale, and I demand before the Lords Council representative to know what your agreement is."

Lord Marshal Grefon pulled a paper from his pouch and thrust it at Katzu. Katzu calmly took the paper and read it carefully. Slowly he placed the paper on the table and smoothed it out with his hand so it laid neatly on the table in front of him. "Lord Marak," Katzu explained, "this document does authorize Lord Marshal Grefon to affect all matters pertaining to the Situ estate of Fardale. I am afraid that I will have to reopen the negotiations if Lord Marshal Grefon demands it."

Lord Marak smiled through tight lips as he also pulled a paper from his pouch and wordlessly handed it to Katzu. Katzu read the agreement thoroughly and placed it on the table before him. "Lord Marshal Grefon," Katzu stated, "this document grants to Lord Marak complete and unequivocal control over all of Fardale with complete authority. I am afraid that the Lords Council can not recognize your claim to represent Fardale."

"I know what the document states," spat Lord Marshal Grefon. "I wrote the document, but Lord Ridak has superceded it with my authorization."

"I am afraid he has not, Lord Marshal Grefon," Katzu said while shaking his head. "The pronouncement given to Lord Marak does not allow for him to answer to any Situ authority concerning Fardale. While his Vows of Service may bind him to Lord Ridak in other matters of the Situ Clan, nothing Lord Ridak can do has any bearing on Fardale. As far as Fardale is concerned, Lord Ridak has no say at all."

"Well, Lord Ridak has instructed me to remove Lord Marak from Fardale, if I feel he has overstepped his abilities," declared Lord Marshal Grefon. "You leave me no choice, Marak. I would rather have had a straight answer out of you, but I now revoke your authority to be Lord Of Fardale."

Katzu shook his head and held up his hand to stop the conversation. "I do not think that you grasp the meaning of my last statement, Lord Marshal," Katzu interrupted. "You have no authority over Lord Marak at all. None. I do not care what papers Lord Ridak gives you. Lord Marak owes no allegiance to you. Lord Marak may be bound to Lord Ridak through his Vows of Service and Lord Ridak may chose to exercise his options in that regard but, even if he does, it will have no effect on Lord Marak's relationship with Fardale."

"Are you saying that Lord Ridak can not choose another Lord of Fardale?" questioned Lord Marshal Grefon.

"That is correct," answered Katzu. "He may enslave Lord Marak or kill him for violations of his Vows of Service, but Fardale is no longer Lord Ridak's to control. After examining the documents I consider this a ruling of the Lords Council. If this was not the intent of the person who drafted this document, then that person should never be allowed to draft another."

Grefon's face boiled with anger and embarrassment. He had already stated that he drafted the document and Katzu well knew it when he made his sly comment. "I will return to Fardale with you when you are ready to leave, Lord Marak," grumbled Grefon as he turned and stormed out of the Meeting Chamber.

Katzu looked directly at Lord Marak and spoke in a soft and soothing voice. "You have made a powerful enemy here today, Lord Marak. If you have given Vows of Service to Lord Ridak, as I'm sure you have, you had better tidy up the affairs of your life soon. It does not have the sign of longevity

hanging upon it."

"I'm not sure that I agree with your statement, Katsu," smiled Lord Marak. "You have already ruled that Lord Ridak has no authority over any aspect of Fardale. My only duty to Lord Ridak is to rule Fardale. As such, it is impossible for him to legally give me any orders at all. If he can not give me any orders, the only way I could break my Vows of Service to him, if I had given any, is to lie to him personally. And I have no need nor desire to lie to him. In fact, I have no need to ever talk to him again."

Katsu nodded enthusiastically. "Lord Marak," chuckled Katsu, "when you get done playing Lord of the frontier, you may well have a bright career ahead of you as a mediator for the Lords Council. Your logic is impeccable."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 16

Lord Marshal

Lord Marshal Grefon sat impatiently on his horse while Lord Marak held a conversation with Yenga, the Sorgan Marshal. Grefon had heard that Lord Marak needed a mount to return to Fardale and assumed that Marak's horse must have taken ill on the trip to Watula Valley. It appeared to Grefon that the request for a horse took quite a long time, but eventually a soldier led a fresh mount to Lord Marak and saluted. Lord Marshal Grefon shook his head at the Sorgan soldier's poor knowledge of procedure. One never saluted another Clan's Lord. He would have expected more from one of Marshal Yenga's men.

Marak mounted and started back towards Fardale without a glance towards Grefon, so the Situ Lord Marshal followed in silence. He was not accustomed to being treated so poorly by one of his own officers and Grefon decided he would wait until they reached Fardale to straighten out the ungrateful pup. It might be amusing to dress down Marak in front of his own men.

Marak kept up a fairly good pace and the trip to the border of Fardale did not take long. The first Fardale field that Lord Marshal Grefon saw was quite barren. He shook his head at the size of the task he would have when he took over Fardale. He noticed about a dozen fresh graves in one corner of the field and some of them were very small, as if a grave for a child. On closer inspection Grefon saw the distinctive markers made from the broken head of a hoe, each one scratched with words identifying the lost soul. Not one of the graves was marked with a sword hilt, which indicates the death of a soldier.

Lord Marshal Grefon realized that the Sorgans had attacked this field and killed farmers and children. He wondered what Marak had given up to end the conflict. Grefon's anger grew as he thought of a Situ soldier giving in to his enemy. Marak should have struck back at the Sorgans with every soldier he commanded, but it was obvious that the Lord of Fardale chose to submit instead. Small wonder Lord Marak did not want Lord Marshal Grefon to know of the settlement he had agreed to. Grefon did not care what Marak wanted, he was determined to find out what Marak had given away from his estate.

A group of women and children working the barren field paused in their labors to wave to Lord Marak and he waved back. Some of workers wore the brown tunic of slaves, but there was nobody guarding them. Grefon was appalled not only at the casual familiarity of Marak's subjects, but also with the apparent disregard for supervision of Fardale slaves. Any one of these slaves could flee into the woods and never be seen again. Lord Marshal Grefon decided to remain quiet and observe until it was time to confront Lord Marak in front of his men.

The next field Lord Marshal Grefon came to was lush with watula. If anything, the harvest of this field would be greater than any he had seen in Watula Valley and the Sorgan estate was known for its bountiful harvest. Grefon began to think that this field was probably an aberration, but as they progressed closer to the mansion he saw field after field with thriving crops. In fact, the first barren field which Lord Marshal Grefon saw was the aberration. Fardale was flush with watula and would surely have enough grain to meet its contracts, the contracts which Lord Lashendo had stated would be impossible to fulfill.

Each time they passed workers, they waved at Lord Marak and the Fardale Lord waved back. With the estate walls in sight, Lord Marshal Grefon saw soldiers practicing, but the methods they were utilizing were not standard. In fact, their methods were of the same type that reports on Marak had spoken of when he was a Squad Leader. Grefon had credited the young Squad Leader for experimenting with new methods, but actually using these bizarre methods to train an army was another thing entirely.

Some soldiers were crawling through the fields getting dirt all over their yellow and green while others were scampering around as if they couldn't be easily seen. Lord Marshal Grefon shook his head with dismay over the childish routines he observed. Anyone with a decent pair of eyes would easily see these men coming and they would sacrifice speed to utilize these strange maneuvers.

Lord Marshal Grefon was slightly more pleased when they entered the main gate of the Fardale estate.

The soldiers on duty were fresh and sharp. They saluted smartly and were proper in every respect. Grefon recognized some of the men as having been in Marak's Corte when he left Lituk Valley. Tagoro appeared to have been given the rank of Cortain, he noted. That certainly would not hold when they got back to Lituk Valley. Only the Lord Marshal could give Tagoro such a promotion, and only with Lord Ridak's agreement. Marak may promote his own forces as he wished, but he had no control over Grefon's men and Tagoro was one of his men. Thinking along those lines, Grefon searched for Squad Leader Rybak. Rybak was supposed to be reporting on Marak's progress and Grefon had not heard a word since the Corte left Lituk Valley. That boy was overdue for a stern lecture on his attendance to duty.

Lord Marshal Grefon gazed around the Fardale estate and was surprised to see so many new buildings. He wondered how Marak found the time and resources to construct so many new buildings and still be able to grow enough grain to fulfill his contracts. As he continued his inspection, he noticed the complete lack of a slave compound and alarm bells began to go off in his head. He shuddered for a moment and thought Marak might have traded all of the Fardale slaves for peace with his neighbors, but he quickly realized that there would not have been time to dismantle the slave compound. The graves he had seen indicated that the conflict was going on just a few days ago.

If Lord Marak was messing with Khadora's use of slavery as a punishment for serious crimes, Lord Ridak would not be pleased. In fact, the Lords Council would not be pleased. Lord Marshal Grefon definitely needed to get to the bottom of this matter. As he was struggling to store all of his questions in his head, his eyes landed on Rybak. Rybak was also wearing the Cortain plume and Lord Marshal Grefon was almost certain that Rybak immediately about-faced when he saw Grefon.

Marak halted at the steps to the mansion and dismounted and Grefon followed his lead. A young woman pranced down the steps and barely nodded her head instead of bowing to the Lord of Fardale.

"Lord Marak," she excitedly began, "I have some ideas I want to discuss with you as soon as you are available."

Lord Marshal Grefon snickered under his breath as he pictured the upcoming session between Lord

Marak and his new mistress. He could just imagine her important new ideas and wondered what color curtains she was going to ask for. Perhaps she had ideas about furnishing the Lord's suite with rich Fakara silk. Grefon's teeth snapped shut and his jaw tightened when he heard Lord Mark's response.

"It will have to wait, Bursar Kasa," Lord Marak replied. "I understand that there is a Council meeting scheduled this afternoon. I want to update them on our agreement with the Sorgans and Litari. I am going to see Lord Marshal Grefon situated and then I will join you in the Meeting Chamber."

Before Lord Marshal Grefon could regain his wits, the young woman danced off with a sparkle in her eye and Lectain Zorkil strode up with a Marshal of the Ragatha Clan in tow.

"Lord Marak," saluted Lectain Zorkil, "this is Marshal Tingo of Woodville. He appeared this morning with the desire to speak on your behalf before the emissary from the Lords Council. I explained to him that he was too late and he requested to stay and talk with you before he left."

"A pleasure to meet you, Lord Marak," welcomed the Marshal with the red and yellow plume. "Lord Zawbry sends his greetings and offers his limited assistance in your times of trouble. He values the partnership between the Ragatha and Situ Clans and I stand ready to speak on your behalf against the Sorgan and Litari filth."

"Marshal Tingo," addressed Lord Marak, "welcome to Fardale. Please inform Lord Zawbry that I am touched by his consideration, but I have concluded an agreement with the Sorgans and Litari that I am satisfied with. I would welcome a visit from Lord Zawbry to discuss matters of common interest, such as the desire for the Ragatha Clan to utilize Fardale as a right-of-way."

"But we already have such an agreement," protested Marshal Tingo.

"Indeed," commented Lord Marak, "I have read it myself. The agreement, however, does not offer any compensation to Fardale for its use. It is a small matter and not of great consequence, but it will make for a good foundation to base our discussions on. If you wish to discuss this further with me before you leave, I will make time for you following my Council meeting but I fear I must take my leave now."

"Of course, Lord Marak," Marshal Tingo replied. "I would like some more of your time. I will wait until your meeting is over."

Lord Marshal Grefon burned with anger at being treated as a servant. Lord Marak had made no attempt to introduce him to Marshal Tingo or his female Bursar. He stormed up the steps to follow the already retreating Lord Marak. Lord Marak stopped outside the Marshal's suite and opened the door.

"I trust these quarters will be sufficient during your stay with us, Lord Marshal Grefon?" Marak inquired formally.

"Do you not have a Marshal of Fardale yet?" quizzed Grefon.

"I have someone for the position but he has not been installed yet," offered Lord Marak. "He will not be needing these quarters during the time of your stay with us."

"The quarters will do nicely," Lord Marshal Grefon answered as he slung his bag into the room. "I will get settled after the Council meeting."

"You may as well get settled now," instructed Lord Marak. "The Council of Advisors meeting is closed"

to everyone except Council members. I'm sure you can appreciate the delicacy of the matters which might be discussed in such a meeting."

"Of course, I do," snapped Lord Marshal Grefon. "I was privy to the most delicate of Situ matters while you were still tied to your mother. You have no reason to exclude me from any Situ matters."

"The Council of Advisors do not concern themselves with matters of the Situ Clan," clarified Lord Marak. "They deal only in matters of importance to the Fardale estate. While you have high rank in the Situ Clan, you have no standing in Fardale. Were I to convene a meeting to discuss Situ concerns, you would be among the first I would invite. Your knowledge of the Situ Clan is impressive and filled with many facts which others would overlook. I doubt, however, that you could contribute much to the status of our current crop, the value of our holdings in Fardale or the morale of the workers. Please do not be offended. This has nothing to do with your status in the Situ Clan. This has to do with what you can offer to the topics being discussed."

"I heard you mention to that woman that you plan to discuss the agreement with the Sorgan and Litari," pushed Lord Marshal Grefon. "I want to be involved in that discussion."

"That woman, as you call her," smiled Lord Marak, "is Bursar Kasa and she is responsible for some of the miracles that have occurred in Fardale. While you may not think that a woman can possess the skills needed to delve into high finance, I would stand her abilities up against any Bursar in the Situ Clan. As far as the agreement with the Sorgan and Litari, quite frankly, it is none of your business. I have agreed to nothing that affects the Situ Clan or Lord Ridak. If I had, you would be informed."

"You have informed me of nothing," barked Lord Marshal Grefon. "You are hiding every last detail of anything concerning Fardale and it is not acceptable to me or to Lord Ridak."

"I am sorry you feel that way," sighed Lord Marak. "I have much to tell you of Fardale and the progress we have made, but it must wait until the Council meeting is over. I have an entire estate waiting for me and I must dispatch my orders to ensure its smooth operation. Let me get that task out of the way and I will deal with your less immediate thirst for information later. You will not be reporting to Lord Ridak while I am in the meeting, so relax for a while."

Before Lord Marshal Grefon could reply, Lord Marak strode across the entry foyer and entered the large double doors of the Meeting Chamber. Grefon stood and stared after him and noticed the other people streaming into the Meeting Chamber. Lord Marak's Council of Advisors appeared to be quite large, but what struck Grefon between the eyes was the caliber of the people going in. With the exception of Seneschal Pito, Lectain Zorkil, and Marak's female Bursar, everyone was a common laborer.

Grefon's fury actually shook his body when he realized that Lord Marak was going to share information with common laborers, which he refused to divulge to the Lord Marshal of the Situ Clan. Lord Marshal Grefon slammed the door to his temporary quarters and strode out into the courtyard. Nobody paid any attention to the Lord Marshal of the Situ and that further inflamed Grefon's irritation. Normally, when he visited an estate the soldiers all held him in awe and did everything they could think of to grab his attention. Fardale was different. He was sure that everyone knew who he was and yet no one seemed to care. They all went about their chores without notice of his presence.

Lord Marshal Grefon walked around the outside of the mansion aimlessly. At the rear of the mansion was a small courtyard and a flower garden. Grefon headed towards the flower garden and stopped when he saw a Fardale soldier and a young woman in a tight embrace on one of the benches. Recognition of

the soldier registered with the Lord Marshal and Grefon strode over to the couple.

"Squad Leader Rybak," snapped the Lord Marshal.

Rybak looked up and cringed. Silently, he pushed the young woman away from him and she readily took the hint and left the garden.

"It is Cortain Rybak now," corrected the plumed officer. "I did not expect to see you here, Lord Marshal Grefon. How did you get past the bandits?"

"You may be playing at being a Cortain here in Fardale," growled Lord Marshal Grefon, "but you are still a member of my Army and I decide who wears the plumes in my Army. Why have I not received any of your reports on Lord Marak?"

"The bandits," cringed Rybak. "How did you manage to get past them? You are the first person from Lituk Valley to make it this far."

"Surely, you could have found some method of getting a message through to me," insisted Lord Marshal Grefon. "I see a Fardale in shambles and a young Lord out of his depth. What do you have to report?"

"This is not a very safe place to talk," offered Rybak. "Where has Lord Marak put you up?"

"I can detect a stall when I see one, Squad Leader Rybak," scowled Lord Marshal Grefon. "If I don't get your report immediately, you will not even retain the rank of Squad Leader when I get you back to Lituk Valley."

"Cortain Rybak," called a third voice, "your presence is required in the Lectain's quarters immediately. Hurry along."

Lord Marshal Grefon turned to see Cortain Tagoro standing on the path behind him. "What is the meaning of this interruption, Squad Leader Tagoro?" spat the Lord Marshal.

"Has the Lord Marshal of the Situ Clan lost his eyesight?" smiled Cortain Tagoro. "This is a yellow plume upon my helmet, Lord Marshal."

"Not for long, you impertinent dog," scowled Lord Marshal Grefon. "You shall be lucky to remain a free man when we return to Lituk Valley."

"Be that as it may," stated Cortain Tagoro, "but in Fardale I am a Cortain and due the respect associated with the rank, even from superior officers."

Lord Marshal Grefon stepped forward and extended his hand to grasp the plume from Tagoro's helmet. Cortain Tagoro deftly leaped back and pulled the double-edged sword from its sheath on his back and held it the Lord Marshal's chest.

"One more step, Lord Marshal Grefon," snapped Cortain Tagoro, "and I shall have to place you under arrest. You are here as a guest of Lord Marak and, as such, are entitled to certain liberties, but those liberties do not include interfering with military personnel in the performance of their duties."

"I am the Lord Marshal of the Situ Clan," shouted Lord Marshal Grefon. "I will not stand for such insolence on the part of any of my officers. You will place yourself on report and I shall deal with you

when we get back to Lituk Valley."

"Lord Marak has not ordered me to go to Lituk Valley," persisted Cortain Tagoro, "nor do I expect him to do so."

"You do not report to Lord Marak," sizzled Lord Marshal Grefon. "You report to me."

"You are incorrect, Sir," corrected Cortain Tagoro. "No one on this estate reports to you. We are all sworn to Lord Marak and Lord Marak alone. What he orders is what we will do. If you have a desire to be escorted to Lituk Valley, I would suggest taking that matter up with Lord Marak."

Cortain Tagoro promptly sheathed his sword and strode out of the flower garden leaving a dazed and confused Lord Marshal in his wake. Grefon turned to take his anger out on Rybak and found, instead, the Marshal from Woodville.

"Such impertinence would not be accepted in the Ragatha Clan," smiled Marshal Tingo.

"It will not be accepted in the Situ Clan, either," snapped Lord Marshal Grefon. "If I have to bring the entire Situ Army back here to clean this place up, I swear I will. Who does Marak think he is? I put him in this position. Without me, he is nothing. I should let the Sorgans eat him alive and be glad that they have rid Khadora of another fanatic."

Lord Marshal Grefon turned and stormed out of the flower garden leaving a bemused Ragatha Marshal behind. Grefon stormed back into the mansion and saw people filing out of the Meeting Chamber. He went to the door and waited while the people filed out. Seeing Lord Marak at the other end of the room, he impatiently pushed his way through the crowd exiting the room. He ignored the crude remarks thrown at him as he walked briskly towards Lord Marak.

"Now that your meeting with the field hands is over," growled Lord Marshal Grefon, "perhaps you will give me some answers as to what you are doing here in Fardale?"

"I would like to dispatch our Ragatha neighbor first," stated Marak with a barely concealed contempt. "It would enable him to leave the estate before dark and then we can discuss whatever you wish."

"Now!" demanded Lord Marshal Grefon. "You have put me off too long. I want answers as to what you are doing to my estate and I want them now."

Lord Marak's eyes narrowed as he glared at the Situ Lord Marshal. "Your estate?" he quizzed. "Since when did Fardale become your estate?"

"You know what I mean," backpedaled the Lord Marshal. "What are you doing with this Situ estate?"

"You come very close to ending your freedom," Lord Marak declared softly. "Sit. Marshal Tingo will have to wait. What is it you want to know?"

"I want to know everything," Grefon said while trying to calm himself. Marak was no fool and Grefon knew better than to let his temper get hold of him.

"Everything is a very broad term," sighed Lord Marak. "I will not discuss my agreement with the Sorgans and Litari, but I can bring you up to date on our other matters."

"Why won't you discuss the agreement?" Grefon calmly asked. "Your refusal causes me to believe that the solution was detrimental to the Situ Clan."

"I have already assured you that is not the case," declared Lord Marak. "Fardale is in better shape now than it has ever been. Lord Ridak wanted someone in the position here to salvage the grain contracts. I have done that with Kasa's help. There will be no mar on the Situ Clan because of Fardale. I have delivered what I promised to deliver. Does anything else really matter?"

"Yes," Lord Marshal Grefon answered, trying desperately to maintain a calm composure. "Your men refuse to accept me as Lord Marshal of the Situ Clan. I was told that they have sworn to you. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is," affirmed Lord Marak. "Every single person in Fardale has personally sworn Vows of Service to me."

"But the men from Lituk Valley are my men," protested Lord Marshal Grefon. "How can they swear to you when they are already sworn?"

"Lord Ridak gave me absolute authority over Fardale, as you well know," explained Lord Marak. "That allows me to require the Vows from my subjects and replace their previous Vows with Lord Ridak's blessing. Lord Ridak instructed you to send my Corte to Fardale under my command and they were to be stationed in Fardale. Being stationed in Fardale puts them under my authority and requires the utterance of the Vows of Service, again with Lord Ridak's blessing. You may argue that was not his intent, but it no longer matters."

"But if you knew it was not his intent," reasoned Lord Marshal Grefon, "how could you go ahead and force the Vows?"

"You forced me to," Marak pointed out. "In the first place, I do not know what Lord Ridak intended. I would like to ask you, but I doubt you would reveal it to me. Secondly, you intentionally placed a spy in my ranks. The obvious reason for this is that you considered me expendable and wanted to choose the timing of my disposal. I would guess that Lord Ridak and yourself may have had entirely different reasons for sending me out here, but both of them were selfish reasons. Neither of you thought I would be able to do what I promised to do and now that I have, you don't know what to make of it. I believe you may have tipped your hand when you spoke of Fardale as being your estate."

"You think you are so clever, Squad Leader," snarled Lord Marshal Grefon, "but I control something you hold very dear."

Quicker than Lord Marshal Grefon could react, Lord Marak stabbed a knife into the table between the Lord Marshal's hands and rose.

"Were you to even think of harming my mother," threatened Lord Marak, "I would treat you to slowest, most painful death you could imagine and I know your imagination is colorful. This meeting is over Lord Marshal of the Situ. You will not be needing accommodations for the night. If you are not off Fardale lands by nightfall, my men will hunt you down like the animal you are. Tell Lord Ridak that his next messenger boy had better have manners and know how to remain civil. Get out of my sight."

Lord Marshal Grefon was about to protest, but when he looked into Lord Marak's eyes, death stared back at him. He quickly rose and left the room. Lord Marak's gaze followed the exiting Lord Marshal and stopped when they landed on Marshal Tingo of Woodville.

"I do not recall inviting you into this room," barked Lord Marak.

"I am sorry, Lord Marak," smiled the Ragatha Marshal as his eyes took in the still vibrating knife stuck in the table. "You said that you would speak with me after the meeting and the door to the room was wide open. I did not realize you were having another meeting before mine."

"If you would afford me a few minutes before we meet," suggested Lord Marak.

"That is not necessary," interrupted the Ragatha Marshal. "I think it is better that you and Lord Zawbry meet face to face, anyway. Why don't I leave you now and return to Woodville? I will tell Lord Zawbry that he should meet with you soon."

"That is an excellent idea," answered Lord Marak. "I look forward to meeting the Lord of Woodville."

The Marshal of Woodville quickly exited and raced after the departing Lord Marshal Grefon, hoping he would be in time to talk with him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 17

Reunion

Marshal Tingo entered Lord Zawbry's study and saluted. The Ragatha Lord motioned for the Marshal to sit and waited until he complied.

"How did the meeting with the emissary go?" Lord Zawbry inquired.

"I never got there," reported Marshal Tingo. "Lord Marak had already left, but I was invited to stay and wait for him. It gave me a good chance to check out the Fardale estate. I have some interesting information for you."

"It is a shame you missed the meeting," lamented Lord Zawbry, "but any information we can get on our new neighbor will be useful, as long as the agreement doesn't cut off our route to the rest of the world."

"I don't think Lord Marak gave them any land," guessed Marshal Tingo. "I think he gave them all of his slaves, though. There was not one slave on the entire estate. The most interesting tidbit is that Lord Marshal Grefon was there."

"The Situ Lord Marshal came for the meeting?" asked Lord Zawbry.

"I don't think he was able to get into the meeting," smiled Marshal Tingo. "He is not a happy person. Lord Marak did not treat him well. As a matter of fact, I saw his life threatened twice while I was there. A Certain pulled a sword on him and held it to the Lord Marshal's chest and threatened to arrest him."

"You saw this?" Lord Zawbry asked incredulously.

"Yes," laughed Marshal Tingo, "and only moments later, Lord Marak, himself, stabbed a knife between Lord Marshal Grefon's hands and ordered him to get out of Fardale before dark or he would have his

men hunt him down like an animal."

"It sounds like there is a serious rift in the Situ camp," smiled Lord Zawbry. "Did the Lord Marshal leave?"

"Like a dog with his tail between his legs," chuckled Marshal Tingo. "I had a chance to talk with him as he was leaving. He is a very bitter man. He actually said he hopes the Sorgans wiped Fardale out. I know he would not offer any support to Lord Marak, even if the Fardale Lord pleaded for it."

"Excellent!" beamed Lord Zawbry. "That sounds like an invitation if I have ever heard one. We must act before the Litari learn of this. They would not hesitate to seal us off. With Fardale under our control, the Litari will be powerless even with Sorgan support. Still, we must have some provocation so it does not appear as if we are a threat to others."

"I may have what you are looking for," smiled Marshal Tingo. "Lord Marak mentioned meeting with you in Fardale to talk about our use of Fardale to access our other estates. He indicated that he had read the contract and said that Fardale has received no compensation for the use. He indicated that it was nothing major, merely a technicality to ensure that it is a legal contract."

"He is clever, this Marak," noted Lord Zawbry. "That had been my intention all along. When I penned the contract with Lord Lashendo and Bursar Tachora, I offered one sum to Fardale or triple the sum to the two of them privately. As I expected they jumped at the private funds. What fools. If it was left unchanged for three years, we would have had a land grant, a legal and permanent right-of-way across Fardale."

"Well," suggested Marshal Tingo, "what would happen if you met with Lord Marak and the talks did not go well? He would stop our access and we could claim he was breaking a contract."

"Yes," thought Lord Zawbry, "that would work, but we will have to time it perfectly. We must already have the armies from our other estates ready to strike Fardale from the other side when the talks break down. I must travel to meet with Lord Sevrin. He is going to have to authorize this before we start something that he will not approve of. I will not risk offending our Clan Lord over Fardale. You have done well, Marshal Tingo, well, indeed."

* * * *

Cortain Tagoro looked up from his polishing when he heard the knock on his door. He shouted for the person to enter as he placed his helmet on the stand next to his bed.

"Excuse me, Tagoro, may I speak with you?" asked Cortain Rybak.

"Sure," Tagoro answered. "Come on in."

Cortain Rybak grabbed a chair next to the small table and sat down. "I wanted to thank for saving me from Lord Marshal Grefon yesterday," thanked Rybak. "I was trying to avoid him ever since he entered the estate and the flower garden was the one place I didn't think he would look."

"No thanks are necessary," smiled Tagoro. "Elsa came running directly to me when you shoed her out of the garden. You can actually thank yourself. If you hadn't leveled with me about what Grefon wanted you to do, I would not have arrived so quickly."

"I had to tell somebody," admitted Rybak. "Koors started using me against the other men and then

Grefon picked up on it. It seemed to be an easy way to rise in rank and I didn't see any harm in it. I guess I have Lord Marak to thank for my change in attitude. If I hadn't seen what a change in attitude one man can make in people, I probably would have remained ignorant my whole life. When I saw how much he cared for his people, my stomach turned every time I thought of my obligations to Lord Marshal Grefon. I used the bandits as an excuse, but I could have gotten word out with the Ragatha caravans. I'm glad I didn't. You didn't break your promise about telling Lord Marak, did you?"

"No, smiled Tagoro. "I don't have to tell Lord Marak. He has known since before we left Lituk Valley."

"He knows?" asked Rybak. "Then why hasn't he done anything about it? Why did he allow me to rise to Cortain?"

"I'm not sure anybody understands all of Lord Marak," theorized Tagoro. "I know he believes that there is good in every person and that if you dig deep enough you will find it. Perhaps he understood your confusion about what is right and what is wrong. Maybe he thought giving you time to think about your actions would solve the problem. It certainly appears that is what has happened."

"I feel bad now that I know he knows," sighed Rybak. "If I try to make it up to him or talk to him about it, he will think I am up to my old games again. I couldn't blame him if he did think that."

"Don't underestimate Lord Marak," smiled Tagoro. "Since you have given your Vows to him, you have not once betrayed him. I am sure that he knows this. My advice is to entirely forget about your past and just concentrate on doing the right thing from now on. The rest will work itself out just fine."

"I wish I had your confidence," Rybak said. "I like it here in Fardale and I'm kind of attached to Elsa. I don't want to lose that. Lord Marshal Grefon sounded like he still had authority over me and that I was going back to Lituk Valley."

"Elsa's a sweet girl," commented Tagoro, "but if you ever get out of line with her, I'd watch her pitchfork."

"She is a brave woman," smiled Rybak. "Heck, she'd make a fine soldier, but I have other plans for her."

"Look," declared Tagoro, "if this thing is really hanging over your head, go and talk with Lord Marak. Don't butter him up and don't offer lengthy explanations. Just tell him flat out that you were supposed to spy on him and you've had a change of heart. Ask his forgiveness and promise you will never even think of doing anything like that again."

"That's it!" exclaimed Rybak. "You are right. I'm dreading the moment he finds out and says something. Let me put that moment behind me. Thanks again, Tagoro."

Tagoro shook his head and picked up his helmet to continue his polishing. Cortain Rybak hurried into the mansion and went straight to the Lord's study. Lord Marak was alone and Cortain Rybak entered after knocking on the open door.

"Yes, Cortain Rybak," Lord Marak said as he looked up from his papers.

"Lord Marak, I..." Rybak began hesitantly, "want you to know that I was sent here to spy for Lord Marshal Grefon. I haven't complied with his orders and I never intend to, but you have the right to know."

Lord Marak smiled as he studied his former rival. "Cortain," he said softly, "you exhibit a great deal of courage coming in here and telling me that. I have known about your mission from the day it began. I knew when you gave your Vows of Service that you had no intention of keeping them. I also recognized the change in you two weeks after that and have never worried since. You have proved to be a fine soldier since you have come to Fardale and I have great hopes for your future in my army."

"That's it?" queried Cortain Rybak. "No punishment? No lectures or demotions?"

"Cortain Rybak," laughed Lord Marak, "you have done nothing wrong. You have thought about doing something wrong, but you never did. If we were punished for each thought we had, Elsa would surely have you black and blue from your toes to your temples by now. No, Cortain, there is no punishment, only admiration for you for having done the right thing. You are dismissed with my compliments on your behavior."

Cortain Rybak smiled broadly as he saluted and smartly marched out of the Lord's study. Bursar Kasa walked in and placed a pile of reports on Marak's desk.

"Are you making the soldier boys blush now?" questioned Kasa. "That Cortain was beet red."

"He's in love," chuckled Lord Marak before he noticed the strange look his Bursar was giving him. "Not with me! With Elsa. What is it you need from me, Bursar Kasa?"

Kasa could not stop laughing. "I never thought I would find a subject that confused My Lord," she laughed. "Who would have suspected that the magic topic would be love?"

"Bursar," interrupted Lord Marak, "I doubt that pile of papers you dragged in here are sensual materials. What did you wish to see me about?"

Bursar Kasa fought to compose herself before answering. "I have an idea for increasing our money," she finally said. "Watula Valley is the largest grain producing Clan in Khadora and most of their grain is already spoken for. Fardale's yield this year will be larger than ever before and none of it is contracted for. I have been trying to negotiate contracts for our grain and the buyers are reticent because they still expect to buy from Khadora Grain Importers at lower prices. My idea is to start buying grain contracts instead of selling them."

"Why would we want to purchase more grain?" questioned Lord Marak. "If we can't sell what we have grown, then we already have too much. We should be thinking of planting a different crop next year."

"I'm not talking about next year," stated Bursar Kasa. "If we buy every grain contract we can find, there will be none left for anybody else. The buyers who are waiting to purchase from Khadora Grain Importers will have no grain at all. They will become anxious to purchase from anybody who has grain for sale and they will start sending offers to us. When we ignore the offers, the price will start to escalate quickly. We will not only sell the contracts we have purchased for a healthy profit, but we might get twice as much money for our own contracts."

"Will this really work?" quizzed Lord Marak. "Won't people know what we are doing?"

"I don't know if it will work," admitted Kasa. "I have not found any records of someone trying this before, but then, again, who would advertise pulling off such a scheme? We still have the Ksaly Company and it would make an excellent vehicle for the grain contracts. Another possible plus from all of

this would be prepaid contracts for next year's crop."

"I do not want to get involved with more prepaid or prearranged contracts," declared Lord Marak. "It may be smart financially, but it leaves us in a vulnerable position with our enemies. We could be crippled if an enemy destroyed our crops rather than defeat our armies. Do we have the finances to purchase all of the available grain contracts?"

"I'm not sure how much is available yet," conceded Bursar Kasa. "I have been spending quite a bit of money on your program for buying mages, but we still haven't gone through Tachora's money. "We also have treasuries in Glendale and Watula Valley which you have access to."

"I would prefer to keep them for emergencies," noted Lord Marak. "If one of our enemies tries to destroy us financially, they will be unaware of those reserves."

"I can see that you look at things differently than I do," remarked Kasa.

"Of course, I do," chuckled Lord Marak. "That is why we make such a good team. You raise our money stores and I'll raise our armies."

"Who are these enemies you keep talking about?" Kasa inquired. "The Sorgans and Litari are no longer enemies."

"That is a hard question to answer, Kasa," frowned Lord Marak. "Lord Ridak is one, for sure, although he has not acknowledged it yet. I fear the Ragatha will be another. They feel penned in by the Litari and even if we continue to let them cross our land, they will not be satisfied until they own it. There will be plenty more once people find out how far my control has grown. That is one of the facets of Khadora culture that I would like to change. At times I feel as if this culture is foreign to me, like maybe I should live with the Chula instead of the flatlanders."

"That's funny," Kasa remarked, "that is the same thing Fisher says, but, of course, he is half Chula. What do you want with all of these mages? We really don't even need as many as we have now. I've heard that there is so little work for them that they go off on a picnic every afternoon for a couple of hours. Surely, you can trust me to find a better investment for your money."

Lord Marak was pleased that his Bursar had not found out about his mage training sessions yet. He did not need to keep it secret from Kasa, but her knowledge of things in Fardale was a useful gauge of what was still secret and what was not. If Kasa did not know something was going on, Marak could feel comfortable that his enemies did not know, either.

"I'll make you a deal," laughed Lord Marak. "You don't limit my spending on mages and I'll allow you to start buying grain contracts."

"Who am I to argue with My Lord?" chuckled Bursar Kasa. "You have a deal."

"Excuse me, Lord Marak," came a voice from the doorway, "but there is a merchant here who wishes to talk directly with you."

Lord Marak was about to brush the merchant off when Bursar Kasa interrupted. "Send him right in," she decided.

Marak shook his head and wondered what the Lords Council would say if he made Kasa a Lord, well,

actually, a Lady. He dropped the thought entirely when the merchant entered. Marak had never seen anyone dress as gaudily as the merchant and wondered whether the man's goods were equally in poor taste. Bursar Kasa took one look at the merchant and decided that she had better things to do.

"I think I will go work on my favorite project," she whispered as she left the room.

The merchant strode in and sat in the chair just vacated by the Bursar. "My Lord," drawled the gaudy merchant, "I have some merchandise made especially for you. It is so special that I did not stop until I reached your mansion. Why, it has your name written all over it."

Lord Marak shook his head and mentally promised to get even with Kasa for inviting this merchant into his study. He looked up, puzzled, as he saw the merchant get up and close the door. "Just what do you think you are doing?" Lord Marak spat out. His senses were immediately alert and he found his hand on one of his belt knives.

"I'm affording us a little privacy," declared the merchant with an entirely different voice, one which Lord Marak recognized.

"Fisher?" Lord Marak whispered. "Is that you?"

"I can see that I am going to have to start using a code word just to get in to see you," Fisher chuckled. "You were about to throw me out, weren't you?"

"Worse than that," Marak laughed. "I wasn't even going to let you in. Where have you been? You disappear as quickly as you appear."

"I have been out shopping for you, My Lord," bowed the merchant. "I have brought you some treasures. My wagons are loaded to overflowing."

"And what goodies have you been spending my money on?" chuckled Lord Marak.

"I have procured enough cloth to outfit an army," boasted Fisher, "a blacksuiting army. I also have wagons loaded with mages."

"Mages?" beamed Lord Marak. "Then you have done well, my friend. How many mages?"

"I have purchased or arranged to purchase over six hundred mages," declared Fisher. "But, alas, I have only brought the mages from one estate with me, though. They take up much more room than bolts of cloth. And how they eat!"

"This is exciting, Fisher!" exclaimed Lord Marak. "You must show me. Which estate was fool enough to get rid of their mages?"

Lord Marak rose and headed for the door while Fisher answered. "Most of the estates are more than willing to part with their mages, My Lord, but one had an especially good crop. I believe the name of the estate was Lituk Valley."

Lord Marak stopped short with the open door in his hand. He gently closed the door as he stepped back into his study. "Are you serious?" he asked. "Is she one of them?"

Fisher grinned broadly as he nodded. "She is, My Lord," he promised. "I have not told any of them

where I was taking them, so she does not know you are here."

"Does Lord Ridak know?" Lord Marak asked. "I just threw Lord Marshal Grefon out of Fardale because he threatened to use her against me. Oh, if you could have been here a day sooner. I have sowed the seeds of a war over her."

"I am sorry, Lord Marak," Fisher replied solemnly. "We left Lituk Valley the same time he did. I am sure he noticed your mother getting into the wagon, but nobody knew where the mages were going. In fact, Lord Ridak demanded that he not be told, so he would not be able to answer your questions should you ever ask."

"He saw her leaving?" mused Marak. "Then, he was just trying to provoke me. He wants the Situ to crush me so he can have Fardale for himself. There will be a war with the Situ no matter what I do."

"I'm afraid that is inevitable," sighed Fisher. "You were never meant to succeed out here, you were meant to die trying. Remember one thing about Khadora, my friend, there are no Lords whom you can trust. There are only Lords you can control or conquer. Go, tend to your mother. We can talk later."

Lord Marak nodded and embraced his friend and then ran out of the mansion to the waiting wagons. The mages were all out of the wagons stretching their cramped muscles. Glenda saw Marak right away, but she kept looking towards the surrounding troops as if she was afraid they would beat her for straying too far from the wagons. Marak ran over and picked her up and twirled her around.

"There is nobody here to fear, Mother," he exclaimed as he kissed her. "I am the Lord of Fardale and no one will harm you or anyone else. Come into my mansion and bring the others. You shall dine as you have not dined in years."

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she hugged her son. Marak saw the other mages, most of whom were slaves, looking around the estate for the slave compound and figured it was time to end their fears.

"Mages of Lituk Valley," Lord Marak shouted, "I am Lord Marak of Fardale and I welcome you. I know you are tired, frightened and hungry and we will alleviate all three conditions shortly. First, let me tell those of you who were slaves at Lituk Valley that you are no longer slaves. Fardale places a very high value on your talents and we invite you to experiment with your abilities. We do have mages here that are trained to help you with any stumbling blocks you may have with your abilities. Secondly, I will order a feast to ease your immediate hunger. As for continued hunger, there is no such thing in Fardale. You will always have more food than you can eat. As for accommodations, we have new facilities waiting for you and more will be built as the year progresses. Now, all of you come into the mansion and get cleaned up for a feast."

Many of the mages looked around in astonishment and others laughed and hugged each other. Lord Marak did not notice any of them except his mother. He gently took her by the hand and led her into the mansion. Seneschal Pito had observed the speech and was already issuing instructions to the household staff to make ready for a feast. People ran everywhere as they rushed to make Lord Marak's words ring true. Guest rooms were opened up so the mages could freshen up, change, or just rest. One of the Visiting Lords suites was set up for Lord Marak's mother as her permanent residence.

"This is going to take some time to get used to," Glenda said with tears still in her eyes.

"You will be amazed at how quickly you will adjust," laughed Lord Marak. "We are doing some exciting things with our mages, Mother, and I want to get you and your friends involved as soon as possible."

"We will be very receptive to anything we can do to help you, son," Glenda declared as she reached inside Lord Marak's shirt and felt for the necklace. "We can see the way the people here idolize you and that tells us you are a good ruler. Let them rest for a day and provide them with food and clothes and they will be ready to perform miracles for you."

"It is miracles that we are going to need," admitted Lord Marak. "There is so much I want to say to you that I don't know where to begin."

"There is also much that I have to say to you," Glenda replied as she dabbed her eyes. "I do, however, know where to begin. I love you, Son."

Lord Marak's eyes welled up as he hugged his mother. "I love you, too, Mother," he managed to get out before silence claimed the room.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 18

Magic

"Of course, it's a misconception," declared Klora. "People have long associated Sun Magic with light and heat. Growers bring in Sun Mages when they have crops which have suffered from lack of both, but have you ever wondered how a Sun Mage works when the sun is not available to provide power?"

"I thought the power of the sun was always available," admitted Lord Marak.

"Wrong," instructed Klora. "The Sun Mage is really able to control the natural forces of light and heat without the presence of the sun being a factor at all. They can work their magic through the darkest night or in the deepest cave. This is important, Lord Marak, because as soon as you start to see a Sun Mage's capabilities in the proper light you will begin to see the vast potential for the unleashing of raw power."

Klora turned and focused on a dog-sized rock in the center of the field. "Watch the rock while I demonstrate," she instructed.

Lord Marak and his mother, Glenda, stood with the rest of the newcomers from Lituk Valley and watched the demonstration. As Klora concentrated, the rock began to glow; first, red and then white. The rock began getting smaller as the top appeared to liquefy and run down the sides. Within moments the rock was nothing more than a puddle in the field.

"That was just the force of heat," declared Klora, "and it is only a minor display of the power one mage can harness. This is what the same power can do with light..."

The puddle of molten rock began to glow white as the brilliance steadily increased. Soon the center of the field was filled with an illumination so bright that it hurt their eyes. Lord Marak and the others closed their eyes tightly, but the brilliance persisted through their closed eyelids. Turning his back to the display, Lord Marak called a halt to the demonstration.

"That was like looking into the sun itself?" Lord Marak exclaimed. "How did you discover this?"

"It was partly your fault, Lord Marak," Klora laughed. "You ordered me to bring water to the Chula shaman whenever I saw them in our fields. While they guard their magic jealously, some of their comments got me to thinking about where our powers come from and why there are different disciplines. I don't think there are different powers, just different affinities."

"Do you mean that a Soil Mage and a Sun Mage draw their power the same way and the only difference is how it feels to them?" asked Glenda.

"Exactly," smiled Klora. "While I feel the heat and light of the energy, you feel its substance, its physical structure. Focus on that rock over there and concentrate."

Klora indicated a smaller rock off to the left and the crowd moved about so everyone could see it.

"Now," Klora continued, "focus on its center, the very center, but keep yourself aware of its surface. It should feel as if you are the very center of the rock and your hands are stretching out to caress the surface."

"Yes, yes, I can feel it!" exclaimed Glenda.

"Good," soothed Klora. "Now slowly, but firmly, pull the surface into the center."

Lord Marak and the others watched in astonishment as the rock actually grew smaller. It did not get tiny, but it was visibly smaller.

"I can't move it any further," sighed Glenda.

"That's okay," Klora said soothingly. "Now, reverse the direction. Push the surface out as quick and as far as you can, to the very limits of your arms and beyond."

The rock grew visibly larger and showered the field as it exploded into thousands of tiny rock shards.

"Excellent!" congratulated Klora. "That was a marvelous first attempt."

Glenda beamed with the joy of accomplishment, but it quickly gave way to a frown. "How is it that you, a Sun Mage, could instruct me as to what I should feel?" inquired Glenda.

"During our daily studies over the last few months," explained Klora, "we have discovered that many of us can feel the other disciplines. I can only feel Sun and Soil, but others here can feel all four. I think mages are categorized early by their dominant feeling and never think to seek for other feelings. Once we became aware of the crossover we held classes in each of the disciplines and tested each other for awareness. Almost every one of us has the ability in at least two disciplines. One is always primary, of course, but some of the women are quite powerful in their secondary discipline."

"What about the other disciplines?" asked one of the Lituk Valley mages.

"An Air Mage can feel the energy flow and command its speed and direction," smiled Klora. "Iscala, could you join us for a demonstration, please?"

A young woman left the group of practicing mages and walked over to Klora. After a brief discussion she turned to the group of newcomers and pointed to a nearby log.

"Please watch that log and see how the forces of an Air Mage can affect its speed and direction," Iscala stated.

The group quickly repositioned so that everyone could watch the log. Iscala focused on the log and it rose slowly upward. The crowd of newcomers applauded, but Klora held up her hand for silence and everyone continued to watch the floating log. Iscala gave a slight nod of her head and the log screamed across the field and into the woods with such speed that people lost sight of it.

"Thank you, Iscala," Klora smiled as she turned to the crowd of open-mouthed newcomers. "Iscala is leading the group of Air Mages with her magnificent manipulation and control of the forces of speed and direction. Iscala, please fetch Wogra for me."

Iscala smiled at the group and hurried off. Almost immediately, another woman, slightly older, replaced her at Klora's side.

"Wogra, here, is our best Water Mage," waved Klora. "A Water Mage can channel the energy's interaction with outside forces, essentially, by increasing or decreasing its pressure. Wogra has been experimenting on larger objects and she exhibits superb control. Some of you Water Mages will have your eyes opened with this demonstration. We've been led to believe that Water Mages can only interact with water, such as forcing rain out of clouds. This is far from the truth. Proceed, Wogra."

Wogra pointed to a huge sevevor tree across the field as she spoke. "That large sevevor tree is not a likely object for a Water Mage to manipulate," she began, "but we have discovered that all objects can be manipulated by a Water Mage. I am going to concentrate on the saps within the tree. I am going to increase the pressure on the saps, forcing them to expand rapidly, very rapidly."

The crowd of newcomers watched intently as Wogra focused on the sevevor tree. Visibly, there was not much to see. The tall tree appeared to bulge slightly, but not enough to indicate that anything was happening. Suddenly, the entire sevevor tree vanished in a puff of smoke. The only indication that the tree had exploded was the mass of raining debris floating down all over the field. The pieces were so small that they could not be distinguished as being from a sevevor tree. The newcomers applauded briskly and Wogra gave a humorous bow before leaving the group.

"As you can see," Klora said loudly, reclaiming the group's attention, "we have learned quite a bit about our magic and have developed new uses for it. We are far from knowing all that we wish to know and we welcome you newcomers to our group. We have found that the more mages involved in the practice groups, the more we learn. All of you will contribute something valuable to our learning."

"Why are all of the new uses so destructive?" asked one of the newcomers.

Klora looked briefly at Lord Marak before answering. "Not all of our studies are directed toward exploding things," Klora explained, "but you must admit, it does make for an interesting demonstration. We are interested in any improvement of knowledge in the area of magic, but we are also pursuing the use of magic as a weapon. Lord Marak has embarked upon a campaign to elevate the status of mages in Khadora. As you know, we are considered no higher than a hoe or a rake on many of the estates in Khadora. Lord Marak is using that misconception to gather as many of the mages in Khadora as he can. You are the first new group to arrive, but you will most certainly not be the last."

"I have already contracted to purchase six hundred mages," Lord Marak interjected. "Most of them are slaves and will gain their freedom when they arrive. What the Mage Corps is doing out here has been kept a secret, even from the rest of Fardale. We must maintain that secrecy until we have gathered as

many mages as we can. Battle magic is not the main goal of this training program, although it is important.

I consider magic to be an important and constructive segment of Khadoran society and I hope to convince the rest of the nation of its importance. Many of the menial tasks in our society depend on mass labor. Magic can change that. If we can prove that there is no need to enslave people, Khadoran society will be the better for it."

"Are you suggesting that our magic can eliminate the need for slaves?" asked one of the newcomers.

"Exactly," agreed Lord Marak. "At Lituk Valley slaves are used to carry water to the fields to irrigate the crops. A Water Mage can use her powers to drive a stream into those same fields and permanently supply irrigation for the crops. That is only one example of reducing the need for slave labor. There are many more. The battle magic is going to be necessary because Khadora is not ready to accept new ideas and Lords will try to eradicate us. I can not allow that to happen. I plan to change Khadora by example, rather than by force, but I will be prepared if others should choose to eliminate me."

"That is the reason each of you are required to give another oath," interrupted Klora. "Your Vows to the Mage Corps, are meant to constrain our knowledge to those who have sworn to Lord Marak. We are not permitted to share our knowledge with mages who have not sworn allegiance to Lord Marak."

"Mages outside the Mage Corps will find out soon enough," lamented Lord Marak. "The first report of us using magic in battle will spread like the coming dawn and we will soon be facing other magicians in battle. That must be delayed as long as possible. If we are forced to use magic in battle, we will attempt to hide its use so that no one will know. Klora, why don't you interview the newcomers and get them situated in their respective disciplines? I must return to the mansion and get the guilds started on new housing for those who will be arriving soon."

Klora moved off to interview and dispersed the group. Glenda remained with her son, Lord Marak. "She does not know of your abilities," Glenda whispered. "I can tell by her actions."

"No, she doesn't," admitted Marak. "No one does. I do not believe that I am the only male with abilities and I do not wish the other Lords to start looking for others. They believe that I am sitting in on the sessions because I have a particular interest in their progress."

"Then you go off and practice on your own?" Glenda inquired.

"Yes," confirmed Lord Marak. "There is never enough time to devote towards practice, but I am doing well enough. Maybe you could join me in those sessions. It would be wonderful and everyone would suspect that we just want some time together."

"Don't we?" smiled Glenda. "You do make a mother proud, Marak, but I worry about you. You have tackled so much at such a young age. Khadora will never welcome your ideas. You realize that, don't you?"

"They will resist," acknowledged Lord Marak. "I do not believe that I will have to fight all of them. Surely, they can not all be blind to what I am trying to do?"

"They will not care what you are trying to do," stressed Glenda. "They will only see you as a threat to their way of life and will attempt to eradicate you like a pest. The Mage Corps will not save you. Within months of your first use of magic, the Lords Council will outlaw its use in battle while bringing in their own mages to defeat you. Do not make the mistake of depending on it."

"I will try not to," promised Lord Marak. "I trust that everyone's new quarters and wardrobes are satisfactory?"

"Everyone is thrilled, Marak," beamed Glenda. "I am especially happy that you have chosen such a fine, young woman to be your assistant. Kasa is so full of life and smart, as well."

"Mother," scolded Lord Marak, "Kasa is not my assistant. She is the Bursar of Fardale and an excellent one at that. Do not attempt to marry me off. I have too much to deal with as it is. Besides, Kasa has no interest in me. She is only interested in being the best Bursar that she can be."

"You are so blind in some areas," laughed Glenda. "Very well, you will learn in your own time. I must get back to the group. Most everyone has already been assigned and I do not want to miss the first session."

Lord Marak watched his mother join the other new mages before he turned and walked back towards the mansion. The field the Mage Corps had claimed for their own was out of the way and in an area where people had no reason to venture. As he approached the main gate, Lord Marak saw a flurry of red and yellow uniforms and quickened his step. Cortain Tagoro rushed out to greet him.

"Lord Zawbry of Woodville is here," Cortain Tagoro explained. "He brought a Squad of Ragatha soldiers with him as an escort."

"Did we have any advance notice of his arrival?" inquired Lord Marak.

"No," replied Cortain Tagoro. "Should I prescribe punishment for the lax patrols?"

"No," Lord Marak answered. "Schedule them for further training. Explain the need for absolute security of the estate and make sure the training is intensive. Another lapse by the same group will be dealt with more harshly. Make sure they know."

Cortain Tagoro nodded and sprinted off in the direction of the Ragatha border. Lord Marak strode into the courtyard with a purposeful stride. Lord Zawbry was all smiles while Marshal Tingo whispered in his ear. Marshal Tingo straightened as Lord Marak approached.

"Lord Marak," introduced Marshal Tingo, "I have the pleasure to introduce Lord Zawbry, Ragatha Lord of Woodville."

"Thank you, Marshal Tingo," uttered Lord Marak. "Welcome to Fardale, Lord Zawbry. Will you join me in the Meeting Chamber?"

"It will be my pleasure, Lord Marak," smiled Lord Zawbry as he followed Lord Marak up the steps.

Lord Marak paused at the top of the steps and saw the Ragatha Squad following their Lord. "Lectain Zorkil," Marak ordered, "see to Lord Zawbry's men. Make sure they are refreshed from their long journey. Marshal Tingo will be joining his Lord in the Meeting Chamber. I wish you to join us after the Ragatha are settled."

Lord Marak glanced at the surprised look on Lord Zawbry's face as he turned and led the way into the mansion. Several of the visiting Lord's men would normally have been allowed into the Meeting Chamber to act as bodyguards, but Lord Marak wanted to gauge Lord Zawbry's reaction to surprises and he was not disappointed. Lord Zawbry did not know how to react and sought some sign of approval or

complaint from his Marshal. Unfortunately for Lord Zawbry, Marshal Tingo was not a quick thinker, either, and the three men continued into the mansion to the Meeting Chamber without any guards at all. By the time Lord Marak got Lord Zawbry settled, Lectain Zorkil appeared.

"I am very pleased that you have found time to visit," welcomed Lord Marak. "Marshal Tingo indicated that I should expect you. I trust all is well in Woodville?"

"Very much so," opened Lord Zawbry. "I could not help notice the healthy fields of grain you have cultivated in Fardale. It would appear that you have a better feel for the soil than Lord Lashendo did."

This was an obvious reference to the fact that Lord Marak's mother was a Soil Mage and that Lord Zawbry knew it. "My family has always held a great regard for the soil," nodded Lord Marak. "When properly cared for, it will yield what you desire."

"Marshal Tingo informs me that you have some concern with the current agreement allowing for our transit across your lands," Lord Zawbry stated.

Lord Marak noticed that the Ragatha Lord liked to get right to the point when he was prepared for an issue. He offered none of the standard goodwill statements which normally occurred at a first meeting of Lords. Obviously, Lord Zawbry was prepared for a confrontation or actually hoping for one. "The current agreement is not acceptable," confirmed Lord Marak. "Perhaps this is a good time to execute a new one."

"The current agreement was acceptable to Lord Lashendo," declared Lord Zawbry. "I fail to see why anything has changed."

"As the new Lord of Fardale," smiled Lord Marak, "I have caused many changes. I would think that you would be eager to execute a new agreement, considering the delicate position Woodville is in."

"Delicate position?" questioned Lord Zawbry with a rising voice. "What makes you think Woodville is in a delicate position?"

"Perhaps I am not seeing things clearly," offered Lord Marak. "I thought the rest of the Ragatha estates were to the West. If you are not in a delicate position, why do you seek an agreement to take your caravans to the East? That would appear to be the long way around."

Lord Zawbry bit his lip slightly and Lord Marak could almost hear the gears turning in his opponent's head. "We do not like being beholden to the Litari," Lord Zawbry finally answered. "I fail to see what that has to do with this discussion, though. Either you will honor the agreement made with Lord Lashendo or you will not."

"The current agreement does not offer any compensation for the use of Fardale land," Lord Marak pointed out. "My Bursar has informed me that this will result in our losing title to the land in a number of years. Surely, you can see why I seek a new agreement?"

"The agreement was fairly made," suggested Lord Zawbry. "Do you seek to change it after its signing? Is this the way the Situ do business?"

"A fair agreement?" mused Lord Marak. "Do you really believe this is a fair agreement?"

"Of course, it is fair," blustered Lord Zawbry. "Why would a friendly neighbor object to you using his

land if it is only for transit?"

"Well, you certainly have a point there," agreed Lord Marak, "and the Ragatha are certainly friendly neighbors. Wonderful, then you will have no objections to penning a like instrument allowing our transit through your lands to the West. I will have it drawn up immediately and, in the meantime, we can discuss other issues which affect both of our estates."

Lord Zawbry's mouth hung open. This was one twist he had not envisioned. Giving the Situ a land grant across Woodville would never be accepted by Lord Sevrin, but he had just indicated that it was a normal and friendly thing to do. "I would have to pass the new agreement by Lord Sevrin before I could sign it," dodged Lord Zawbry.

"Lord Lashendo did not have to get the current agreement authorized by Lord Ridak, did he?" Lord Marak innocently inquired. "I have authorization to enter into such an agreement myself if I so desire."

"The Ragatha Clan has different requirements than the Situ," bluffed Lord Zawbry. "Any new agreements should have little bearing on the current agreement, anyway. The question is whether or not you are going to honor the current agreement."

"Do you have an objection to changing the agreement to allow for the payment of a single copper coin per year in compensation?" asked Lord Marak. "That is the merest of payments I could think of."

Lord Zawbry was biting his lip again and Marak knew then that this meeting was intended to fail. Lord Zawbry had no intention of changing the agreement. In fact, he was waiting for Marak to demand a change to it so he could storm out of the room, but that was hard to do when Marak was only asking for a single copper coin per year. No one in Khadora would take that excuse for provocation. Yet, if Lord Zawbry refused to change the agreement, Fardale would be giving its land away in the form of a land grant.

"It is not the money that is at the heart of this discussion," Lord Zawbry finally stated. "It is whether or not the new Lord of Fardale will live up to the agreements of his predecessor. You will either live up to the agreement or you will not. Which will it be, Lord Marak?"

Marak signaled to Kasa, who had slipped in right after Lectain Zorkil, and she came over to him. "Bursar Kasa," Lord Marak smiled, "have you had a chance to examine the agreement?"

Lord Zawbry looked at the young woman with contempt. It was against all tradition to allow a woman into a position of power and it strengthened his resolve to remove the Situ from this area of the country. He finally had this Lord Marak where he wanted him. There was nothing left for the young Lord to say except that he would not honor the agreement. He had been worried for a while with some of the devious suggestions the young Lord had made. He could not allow Marak to come up with any solution to the problem because the troops from the other estates were already on the march. Within a couple of weeks, Fardale would exist only as a Ragatha estate.

"I would prefer that this agreement be renegotiated for the good of all parties," commented Bursar Kasa. "It is not a well written agreement to begin with."

Lord Zawbry smiled as Lord Marak asked, "What is wrong with the agreement, Bursar?"

"Well, the most obvious problem that I have with it," smiled Kasa, "is that it doesn't allow for any compensation to us. The money is not an issue, but the law is clear. If we continue to let the Ragatha use

the land under this contract, they would gain legal title to the land after three years."

"Yes," sighed Lord Marak, "I thought that was what you said. I have so much trouble understanding these complex documents. Are there any other problems?"

"Actually, there is," Kasa replied, trying hard to suppress her grin. "According to the way this contract is written, we must allow Ragatha wagons to cross Fardale, but there has been no provision made for anything else. Wagons are specifically mentioned and because of that no one could interpret this document to mean that anything else must be allowed to cross Fardale. There is no mention of guards for the caravans. Boy, is that foolish. Imagine, a caravan without guards?"

Lord Zawbry's lower lip was in his mouth now and Lectain Zorkil was obviously having trouble keeping a straight face.

"In fact," Bursar Kasa continued, "this contract does not even mention horses or people. I can't imagine how the wagons are going to be able to move."

"Lord Zawbry," smiled Lord Marak, "I will honor this agreement if you really want me to, just so you know that Fardale does honor its prior agreements, but I think we really should execute another agreement for both our sakes."

Lord Zawbry stood and banged his fist on the table. His face red with fury, he pushed the chair against the table. "I will not stand for being made out a fool," he blustered. "The agreement shall stand as it is. Should you try to stop my people from crossing your land, there will be a penalty to pay."

With that, Lord Zawbry stormed out of the room with an embarrassed Marshal Tingo in his wake.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 19

War Drums

Lord Marak ran along the trail as quickly as he could. He sped into the field where the mages practiced and slid to a halt when he saw Klora, the head mage.

"Is somebody hurt?" breathed Lord Marak.

Klora quickly turned to face the Lord of Fardale. "No, My Lord," she grinned. "I'm sorry if my message caused you to think that there was an accident, but I was so very excited when I sent for you. We have finally found a solution for your pet project."

"Do you mean you are able to communicate over long distances?" queried Lord Marak. "Is it done with fast projectiles like we thought?"

"Better!" exclaimed Klora. "The projectile idea worked, but it was too hard to control where it landed. We have found something better, although it also has limitations. We call it an Air Tube. Iscala will demonstrate it for you."

"Step in closer to me, Lord Marak," instructed Iscala. "In an open area like this you will need to be

close to the Air Mage to hear what is going on."

Lord Marak stepped next to Iscala and watched her. While he did not see her do anything, sounds started emanating from the air around her. Marak listened carefully to the noises of metal striking metal and scraping sounds. The sounds were certainly familiar, but he was unable to place them. For several moments he listened to the noises and then heard footsteps approaching. As clearly as if he was actually in the room, he heard Seneschal Pito's voice requesting a bit of food for his midday meal. Lord Marak realized that he was hearing the sounds from the kitchen in the mansion.

"We used the kitchen because I was familiar with it," Iscala explained. "Another Air Mage is at the other end to receive the Air Tube."

"Can they hear us?" puzzled Lord Marak.

"If we want them to," nodded Iscala. "Right now we are operating it in only one direction. I thought we might scare the kitchen help if they heard us, but we have tested it out here and it can work both ways."

"There are actually three different states that the Air Tube can take," interrupted Klora. "It can be operated in either direction alone, or in both directions at the same time. It is a matter of pressure in the tube. If the pressure is equalized at both ends, it is a two way Air Tube. If you want it to be only one way, you have only to increase the pressure on the talking end or decrease it on the hearing end. Both actions have the same effect."

"Who created this Air Tube?" inquired Lord Marak. "Was it Iscala or the Air Mage in the kitchen?"

"I created it," answered Iscala. "The creating Air Mage must know the location where the Air Tube is to be sent. That is why I chose the kitchen."

"I did not see you do anything," stated Lord Marak, "and I was watching you. Was the Air Tube already set up when I arrived?"

"No, Lord Marak," Iscala explained. "You can not see anything because there is nothing to see. It is actually a very low level spell and does not require much energy to create. It requires practically nothing to maintain once it is set up, but there must be an Air Mage at each end for the duration of the spell."

"How great a distance can this be used over?" Marak asked excitedly. "Could we use it from Glendale to here?"

"We don't know," admitted Klora. "This is the greatest distance we have tried so far. Theoretically, any distance could be achieved, but there are many things to be considered. If the Air Tube is broken momentarily, there can be a slight loss in what you hear. This could happen if a person or animal breaks the Air Tube by walking through it. It will instantly mend itself, but you will have that slight loss. Over a great distance the Air Tube could be broken many times and the quality of what you are hearing may not be worth the effort."

"What if something is put in the path of the Air Tube, like a fallen tree?" questioned Lord Marak.

"That is not a problem," replied Iscala. "The Air Tube seeks to reestablish itself just as it does when someone walks through it. It may result in a slightly longer delay before the sound continues, but not that much of a delay."

"Can all of our Air Mages perform this task?" asked Lord Marak.

"No," Kloro answered. "Only an Air Mage with some water magic can handle the differences in pressure needed to direct the flow of the sounds. It does not require a very advanced Air Mage, though."

"Excellent," grinned Lord Marak. "I am going to need three of these special Air Mages right away. All of them need to be familiar with the Meeting Chamber and the room which used to house the Bursar's assistant. Do not choose Air Mages who are required for research, but the ones chosen must be able to perform diplomatic duties. I am going to station one at Glendale and one at Watula Valley. They are going to be my representatives to their respective Council of Advisors at each estate and I do not want the residing Lords to know of their capabilities. We will call them Correspondents."

"They are to be spies?" queried Kloro.

"Exactly," smiled Lord Marak. "The third Air Mage will move into the room which used to house the Bursar's assistant. She will become my Correspondent and monitor the other two. Each remote Correspondent will have a schedule for reporting in. I want to monitor everything that goes on at both estates if we can."

"I'll have your three mages ready for you this afternoon," promised Kloro.

"Good," Lord Marak declared. "I also want you to continue researching this magic, Iscala. It would be good if we could send it to places with no Air Mage on the other end."

"I doubt that is possible, Lord Marak," frowned Iscala, "but we will try to find a way."

Lord Marak spent the next hour with Kloro discussing how the other research projects were coming before he headed along the path back to the mansion. A black shape appeared off to Lord Marak's left and he immediately veered off the path to meet with Fisher.

"You are slipping, Fisher," chuckled Lord Marak. "I saw you before you tried to startle me."

"Waiting for better than an hour to talk with you left me caring little for the effect of surprising you," sighed Fisher. "I have bad news to feed you."

"The Ragatha?" asked Lord Marak.

"As you suspected," affirmed Fisher. "Only the numbers are worse than you imagined. Lord Sevrin has pulled troops out of each of the other four Ragatha estates. He is leaving his estates defenseless. He plans to leave little chance for any Fardale victory."

"But there has been no provocation," pondered Lord Marak.

"I think the troops were already moving when Lord Zawbry spoke with you," guessed Fisher. "Lord Sevrin is probably unaware that there has been no provocation, or he plans on there being one before he arrives with his troops."

"I wonder if Lord Ridak will come to our aid?" quizzed Lord Marak. "If Lord Sevrin's men attack from the West, he could be caught between Lord Ridak's forces and ours."

"I did stop by there on my way back," reported Fisher. "I don't know if he will help, but Lord Marshal

Grefon was not there. He has not been seen since he left to meet with the emissary, although nobody was concerned about his absence."

"The fact that he has not returned would greater the possibility of Lord Ridak helping," stated Lord Marak.

"Lord Ridak might offer to help and then let you die," reminded Fisher. "You did not exactly send Grefon off happy."

"True," admitted Lord Marak, "but if Lord Ridak refuses, Fardale will no longer be a Situ estate. He will either lose it to the Ragatha or he will lose it to me."

"You can not just keep Fardale for yourself," protested Fisher. "He may have given you control of it to run as you see fit, but he is still entitled to a share of the profits. If you try to take that away from him, he'll crush you quicker than the Ragatha and he'll have the support of the Lords Council in doing it."

"I will plan my battle without his help," insisted Lord Marak, "but he will still be asked to help defend Fardale. If he refuses, I will take Fardale for my own."

"Even with the Sorgan and Litari Clans, you can not hope to defeat the Ragatha," ventured Fisher. "If, for some reason, you did win, the same army could not turn around and defend against the Situ Clan. You have too much promise for Khadora to throw your life away, not to mention the lives of all your followers."

"I will throw nothing away, Fisher," declared Lord Marak. "The Ragatha are coming no matter what I do. I must plan on defeating them. Lord Ridak will have to wait his turn unless he helps defeat the enemies of Fardale. How much time do we have before Lord Sevrin gets here?"

"He has to go around both Glendale and Watula Valley," explained Fisher. "He has been on the march for a week already, so he will be here within the week. That is not much time to prepare your defenses. You must finish harvesting your crop in case they try to destroy it."

"Yes," sighed Lord Marak. "There is much to do and little time to do it. I want you to keep me posted on the Ragatha Army. I must know when they are going to attack."

Fisher nodded and slipped back into the trees. Lord Marak regained the path and hurried back to the mansion. He ordered Lectain Zorkil to inform the Council of Advisors that they would meet in one hour and then headed straight to Marshal Yenga's suite. Lord Marak told Marshal Yenga of the pending attack and asked his advice on how to prepare.

"Do the Ragatha know that the Litari and Sorgan Clans owe allegiance to you?" the Marshal of Fardale asked.

"I do not see any way that they could know," commented Lord Marak. "I was planning on using the Litari troops to attack Lord Zawbry from behind."

"That is sound strategy," nodded Marshal Yenga. "I think the best use of the Sorgan troops would be to flank Lord Sevrin's approaching army. What kind of tricks can your Mage Corp provide us?"

Lord Marak's eyes opened wide and Marshal Yenga laughed. "You may be able to hide their training from everyone in Fardale," chuckled Marshal Yenga, "but I know how a Marshal thinks and you think

like one of the finest Marshals I have ever known. In your position you need to explore every path available, whether it is a dead end or not."

"Their battle magic is not perfected," sighed Lord Marak. "They can create fog to confuse the enemy and provide communications to a central point. They can do more, but I do not wish to show my hand if victory can be obtained without letting anyone know we are using mages."

"That is a sound philosophy," agreed Marshal Yenga. "Even fog will allow us to even the odds greatly. If we can get the bulk of their army between us and the Sorgan Clan, we will do great damage with arrows before they know what is going on. Do you plan to appeal to Lord Ridak for help?"

"I feel that I must," frowned Lord Marak. "I doubt they will come to our aid, but not to ask for it would be wrong."

"I know Lord Marshal Grefon," remarked Marshal Yenga. "He will not come to help you. He has visited Fardale more often than any other Situ estate. I assume that he wanted it for his own and now you have it. He will attack the Ragatha after they are victorious, but that will not help us."

"Will he attack if we are victorious?" questioned Lord Marak.

"Not right away," Marshal Yenga answered as he stared out the window. "He will find it hard to believe that young Marak has defeated the five estates of the Ragatha Clan. No, he will try to get more information about the battle and how it was won before he attacks. He is not a Marshal who throws troops into the unknown easily."

"I need to choose the man I send wisely," mused Lord Marak. "It must be somebody who can keep his mouth quiet. Lord Marshal Grefon and Lord Ridak will try to pry information out of him."

"Send Cortain Rybak," suggested Marshal Yenga.

"Rybak?" queried Lord Marak. "You do not know what you are saying. Why did you suggest him?"

"I do not know what has passed between you and Rybak," noted Marshal Yenga, "but I know he is your man. He feels some deep obligation to you and has volunteered for every hazardous task that has come across my desk. I believe that he feels the need to repay you for something."

"That may be so," objected Lord Marak, "but he is not the right man for this job. He feels bad because he was Grefon's stooge when we were sent out here. I know he has changed and I am happy to leave the past forgiven, but not forgotten."

Marshal Yenga walked to his desk and sat down. After a moment, he looked Lord Marak in the eyes. "Send him," Marshal Yenga repeated. "That is if he is willing to go. If what you have told me is true, he is the perfect man for the job. He will resent Lord Marshal Grefon enough that he will reveal nothing."

"I could not send him," stated Lord Marak. "Even if he did not reveal anything, Lord Marshal Grefon would like to get his hands on him."

"Who goes to Lituk Valley is not the most pressing problem that we have," offered Marshal Yenga. "I will leave it up to the Lectains as to who should be sent. What I need to know now is how we can use your Mage Corps to our best advantage."

"You have a bigger challenge than that," declared Lord Marak. "I do not want to kill the Ragatha Army. I want to capture them."

"Capture them?" exclaimed Marshal Yenga. "We will be doing good if we can defeat them. You can't be serious?"

"Ah, but I am," smiled Lord Marak. "Lord Sevrin is coming with every soldier he owns. It is much larger than the three Clans I now control. If we destroy his army, we will not have enough troops to safeguard our new Ragatha estates."

"You plan to take over the Ragatha estates?" echoed Marshal Yenga. "Shouldn't we plan on surviving, first?"

"If we don't survive," remarked Lord Marak, "we won't have to worry about the validity of our other plans. If we kill the Ragatha Clan and lose many of our men doing it, Lord Marshal Grefon will march right out here and claim his prize. I will not allow for that in my planning. We have almost a week to work on this. Let's plan to achieve my objectives and see how it goes."

"We have much less than a week if we are to achieve your goals," remarked Marshal Yenga. "We will have to do something to even the odds if we are to capture the Ragatha Clan. If I know Lord Zawbry, he will attack first to draw your attention so your men have their backs to Lord Sevrin. He will attack late in the afternoon so the battle does not get too fierce. Lord Sevrin's men will attack at dawn and you will be stuck in between."

"But I have trained my men to fight at night," Lord Marak pronounced excitedly.

"Exactly," nodded Marshal Yenga. "Let Lord Zawbry start the conflict and bed down for the night. During the night we will encircle his camp and demand his surrender. It would help if one of your men could actually get to Lord Zawbry's tent unnoticed to demand the surrender."

"With Lord Zawbry's men out of the way," continued Lord Marak, "we will be facing only one front and they will expect only a third of us."

"Precisely," agreed Marshal Yenga. "That will be the hard part. We are going to need something very complicated to capture the armies from the other four estates."

"We will have to discuss this later," sighed Lord Marak. "We have a Council meeting to inform the rest of Fardale about the threat. Perhaps they will have some valuable insight."

* * * *

"You have been gone a long time," greeted Lord Ridak. "I trust everything went well with the emissary?"

"Hardly," frowned Lord Marshal Grefon. "The mediator did not even get to hear the grievance. Marak had already managed to quiet the Sorgan and Litari Clans before the emissary arrived. He must have given them something, but I can not figure out what it was. Marak has proven to be a poor choice for Fardale and he must be removed."

"He was your choice," Lord Ridak reminded the Lord Marshal. "Why didn't you just remove him?"

"I tried," scowled Lord Marshal Grefon. "The emissary claims the pronouncement does not allow for you to replace Marak."

"The emissary claims!" exclaimed Lord Ridak. "Who is he to determine internal Situ affairs?"

"He is the representative of the Lords Council," corrected Lord Marshal Grefon. "If you try to remove Marak and are unsuccessful, the Lords Council may side with him in any disputes. I know of no precedent for the Lords Council to take up with a sworn clansman, but I do not think it would be wise to test their power."

"What condition is Fardale in?" quizzed Lord Ridak.

"They are actually going to be able to fulfill their contracts," surmised Lord Marshal Grefon. "I do not understand how Marak managed it, but Fardale's watula is as healthy and bountiful as the Sorgan crop."

"Then Marak has served his purpose," concluded Lord Ridak. "Recall him at once and I will deal with him."

"You haven't been listening," sighed Lord Marshal Grefon. "You have no control over Fardale. The only person out there that you have any control over is Marak and he will not cooperate with you."

"What are you talking about?" stormed Lord Ridak. "I made Marak Lord of Fardale and I can remove him. If the document I gave to you is not sufficient, I will have another drafted with greater powers."

"There is no such document that you could draft," admitted Lord Marshal Grefon. "The pronouncement you signed to put Marak in power gives him absolute control over Fardale. You have only one sworn clansman in Fardale and that is Lord Marak."

"But you drafted that pronouncement," protested Lord Ridak. "What was going through your head when you specified that clause?"

"Marak pressed for it based upon your words in the meeting before its drafting," explained Lord Marshal Grefon. "I could not put you in the position of going back on your word."

Lord Ridak clenched his fist and slammed it down on the table, making the Lord Marshal blink at the seldom displayed fury which had vaulted Lord Ridak into his leadership position in the Situ Clan. "I want Marak's body delivered to me now," ordered Lord Ridak. "You suggested him for the position. You deliver his body."

"We can hardly attack our own estate," reminded Lord Marshal Grefon, "especially after the emissary from the Lords Council has seen the pronouncement. There is a way that we can profit greatly from Marak's position, though."

"Another of your schemes?" snipped Lord Ridak. "I truly hope for your sake that this one is better than your last. What is it?"

"We can allow others to do our work for us," smiled Lord Marshal Grefon. "Marshal Tingo of Woodville was in Fardale when I showed up. The Ragatha Clan is nervous about Marak's potential for cutting them off from the outside. I think that the Ragatha Clan could eliminate our problem for us."

"Woodville's Army is not much larger than Fardale's," stated Lord Ridak. "Even if we could get them to attack, it would be an even match and you have told me that Marak is an able strategist."

"If Marak was facing only Woodville that might be true," chuckled Lord Marshal Grefon, "but what if he was facing the entire Ragatha Clan?"

"Lord Sevrin would not dare to bring his forces against Fardale," protested Lord Ridak. "He knows that he would be faced by the entire Situ Clan."

"Ah, but would he?" posed Lord Marshal Grefon. "I indicated to Marshal Tingo that Lituk Valley would not raise a hand to protect Lord Marak."

"I fail to share your jubilant mood regarding our giving Fardale to the Ragatha Clan," scolded Lord Ridak. "At least, with Marak in control we will get Fardale back when he dies, an event which you will precipitate immediately."

"You miss the obvious," smiled Lord Marshal Grefon. "I never promised that we would let the Ragatha Clan keep Fardale. I merely indicated that we would not support Lord Marak. Let Lord Sevrin bring his Army to Fardale and remove Lord Marak from power. We would then be entirely justified in attacking the Ragatha Clan with our full fury. With Lord Sevrin's Army all in one place, his defeat would double the size of your Situ holdings. We would not have to push out our borders at Raven's Point to expand."

The first hint of a smile on Lord Ridak's lips appeared. "My holdings would be impressive," Lord Ridak agreed. "Lord Sevrin has never been an ally of mine in the Assembly of Lords and I certainly would not miss him. Do you think you can get him to take the bait?"

"I think that is a distinct possibility," chuckled Lord Marshal Grefon. "His Army is fast approaching Fardale as we speak. His entire Army is only days away from attacking Fardale and ridding us of Lord Marak."

"Only days away?" exclaimed Lord Ridak. "We will never get our forces together in time. How long have you known about this?"

"Do not worry," smiled Lord Marshal Grefon. "We do not need to have our Army ready to help Lord Marak. We will crush the Ragatha Clan as they leave Fardale to go back home. That is why I took so long getting back from Fardale. I have already visited our other estates and informed them to be ready to join with us for the attack. Lord Sevrin will spend at least a week in Fardale before he returns to his own estates. As soon as the battle is over, I will send word to our other Marshals and we will position ourselves to finish off the Ragatha Clan."

"And if Fardale's crops are destroyed in the battle," nodded Lord Ridak, "we can blame the Ragatha Clan. Yes, our Lord Marak is finally going to do something good for the Situ Clan. He is going to die in order to double my holdings. An excellent plan, Lord Marshal. Make sure nothing goes wrong with it."

"What could possibly go wrong?" smiled Lord Marshal Grefon. "I will even take over the Fardale estate and restore it to prosperity when all of this is over. Then you will have a faithful Lord governing it and not have to spend any more time worrying about it."

Lord Ridak fixed his wry gaze on Lord Marshal Grefon and eventually nodded. "I think that will be acceptable, Lord Marshal," admitted Lord Ridak. "First, you will make sure that we are victorious. Afterwards, we will discuss your retirement as Lord Marshal of the Situ Clan."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 20

Night Star

Lord Marak looked up and smiled as the Sunnu Priest was shown into his study. Lord Marak nodded to the guard indicating that he should close the door as he left.

"You look tired, my son," smiled Fisher.

"It has been a long week," replied Lord Marak. "You don't look like you've had much rest, either, Fisher. What is happening out there?"

"Lord Sevrin and his Ragatha Clan Army are within a day's march of Fardale. I would expect the fun to begin soon. I couldn't help noticing that your crops have not been harvested. Didn't I give you enough notice?"

"Your notice was sufficient for me to accomplish the tasks which are necessary to welcome our Ragatha visitors," answered Lord Marak. "All of my laborers and craftsmen have been busy with other endeavors. I felt it necessary to change some of Fardale's landscape. Lord Sevrin will not be amused. If everything goes well, the crops will not be harmed."

"I hope you are not planning on help from Lord Ridak," mentioned Fisher while adjusting his priestly robe. "His Army is not mobilizing to aid you."

"I sent a runner last week," mused Lord Marak. "He has not returned and that troubles me more than the lack of help from Lord Ridak."

"If your runner was Cortain Rybak," Fisher sighed, "don't expect him back ... ever. I saw him arrive at Lituk Valley. He was seized on the mansion steps by Lord Marshal Grefon. He was not treated well and I would not hold out hope of seeing him alive."

Fury filled Lord Marak's face as he hurled his mug across the room. He rose and paced back and forth across his study floor. The guard stationed in his sitting room cracked the door open and peered in. "Is everything all right, My Lord?" the guard asked.

Lord Marak whirled and fixed the guard with a glare. "No, everything is not all right," he declared. "Tell Seneschal Pito that I want him to begin on the uniforms immediately. Every person not directly involved with the military effort is to participate."

The guard looked quizzically at Lord Marak before withdrawing from the doorway. Lord Marak placed his hands on his desk and Fisher could see the muscles of Marak's arms bulging from tenseness. Lord Marak's face was rigid with determination and his eyes had the icy reflection of death in them. Fisher held his tongue as the young Lord of Fardale straightened and began pacing again.

"Lord Ridak has drawn his line," Lord Marak finally uttered, "and I intend to cross it. You are going to witness something that hasn't occurred in Khadora in hundreds of years, Fisher. You are going to witness the birth of a new clan, the Torak Clan."

Fisher smiled broadly. "Your choice of names is most prophetically wise, Lord Marak. Not many would recognize the term from the old tongue, but I am sure you know its meaning."

"Torak means, 'born warrior'," nodded Lord Marak. "My mother asked me to use it."

"It is also the name given by the Chula to the one who will reclaim their honor," remarked Fisher. "I would like to meet your mother some time."

"Perhaps that would be a good idea," puzzled Lord Marak. "It surprised me that she was even familiar with the old tongue."

"What are the colors of the Torak Clan?" quizzed Fisher. "Something appropriate, I hope."

"I don't know about appropriate," acknowledged Lord Marak, "but it will be practical. The colors will be black and silver and the headbands and waistbands will be reversible to present a solid black uniform."

"Practical, indeed," smiled Fisher. "Are your plans for the Ragatha invasion complete?"

"As complete as they can be," Lord Marak informed his spy. "My men are already in position for Lord Zawbry's attack. My best guess based on your information places the attack either this afternoon or tomorrow at the latest. If he doesn't attack by tomorrow, I will start to get worried that we have misread him."

"Do you want me to probe his estate?" offered Fisher. "I may be able to report on his readiness."

"No," decided Lord Marak. "As poor as the odds are against us, my larger fear is Lord Ridak. I would like you to find out what the Situ are up to. I also want to know about Rybak if you can manage it without undue risk. Find out if he is alive and where he is being kept. I should never have allowed him to be the one to go to Lituk Valley. I do not want to create a young widow out of Elsa."

"Certain Rybak is recently married?" questioned Fisher. "Why would he risk such a trip under those circumstances?"

"The fool thinks he owes something to me," snapped Lord Marak. Shaking his head, Lord Marak slumped into his chair. "That is hardly fair of me," he relented. "Rybak was sent here as a spy by Lord Marshal Grefon. He revealed himself to me and asked for my forgiveness. I freely gave it because Rybak is a good officer. He has matured greatly since coming to Fardale and getting away from Lord Marshal Grefon. He insisted on volunteering because he wanted to make amends for his spying. I fought his selection, at first, but his new wife, Elsa, pleaded with me and I gave in. She is a very convincing woman. Kasa has taken her on as an assistant and says that she learns quickly. I wonder how enthusiastic she will be when she learns her husband is dead?"

"He is not dead as far as we know," corrected Fisher. "I will leave immediately for Lituk Valley. If I can..."

"Fisher," Lord Marak interrupted, "I can not ask you to do something so foolish. Just find out where he is being held. I will deal with it in my own way. I need your services too much to endanger you. I certainly do not want to tell Kasa that you are dead, as well."

"Kasa?" queried Fisher. "Why would Kasa care if I died?"

"And you pride yourself on gleaning information from the smallest clue?" laughed Lord Marak. "I should

have your eyes checked out before I send you out on a mission again."

"I never thought ... I mean, she never..." stumbled Fisher.

"Why don't you visit with her before you leave?" suggested Lord Marak.

The door burst open and Marshal Yenga stormed in. "Marshal Tingo has started his attack!" exclaimed the Fardale Marshal as he rushed over to the wall map of Fardale and the surrounding countryside.

The Sunnu Priest rose and exited the room without anyone noticing while Marshal Yenga and Lord Marak hovered in front of the map. "They have placed themselves right where we predicted," Marshal Yenga declared. "Rybak's men are holding them off with arrow volleys like we planned and the Ragatha are not pressing forward. I think it is going to work."

"It will work," insisted Lord Marak. "Inform Glendale and Watula Valley that it is time for them to get into position. Send Squad Leader Botal to me as soon as he is available."

"As you command, My Lord," saluted Marshal Yenga. "It will be a long night."

Lord Marak had time to change into his blacksuit before Squad Leader Botal showed up. "I understand the attack has begun," greeted the Squad Leader.

"Indeed, it has," affirmed Lord Marak. "I just wanted to verify that the two men I requested will be available for me tonight."

"They have already been taken off duty, My Lord," replied Squad Leader Botal. "They will be fully rested when the time comes."

"Excellent," smiled Lord Marak. "You should do the same with the rest of your Squad. There will be little time for rest in between the engagement with Lord Zawbry and the one with Lord Sevrin. Only the Litari and Sorgan Clans will be fully rested. Have the two men wake me when it is time to go."

Squad Leader Botal saluted and retreated from Lord Marak's suite. Knowing that Lord Zawbry's attack was really a feint had helped a great deal. A single Corte was currently holding back the Ragatha Army from Woodville while the rest of Fardale's Army rested nearby. The Litari and Sorgan Armies were already on their way to get set up for Lord Sevrin's attack tomorrow morning. Each field unit had an Air Mage attached to it for communications and Marshal Yenga was able to direct his men from the Meeting Chamber in the mansion. Lord Marak knew the real business of war would not begin until the sun overhead was a distant memory.

Lord Marak slept fitfully, dreaming of Cortain Rybak being tortured at the hands of Lord Marshal Grefon while Lord Ridak stood by laughing. Lord Marak and Elsa were tied up and were being forced to watch the barbaric display. Cortain Rybak kept his lips visibly sealed and Lord Marak admired the man's resolve. Marak worked feverishly at the binds that held him, twisting and turning to undo the tight knots. Finally, he got his hands free just in time to see the Situ soldier plunge his sword into Marak's side. The searing pain forced Lord Marak to sit up and open his eyes. The two blacksuited soldiers of Botal's Squad stood with their backs against the wall and uncertainty in their eyes.

Lord Marak shook the dream from his mind and smiled at the two men. "You must learn a gentler way of waking up your Lord," he chuckled. "Is it time?"

The two soldiers, Halman and Gunta, nodded. "It should take us four hours to get into position," Halman noted.

"And the fourth member of our team?" Lord Marak asked.

"She is waiting outside," offered Gunta. "Iscale appears eager to get going in case something goes wrong."

"She has a good head on her shoulders," indicated Lord Marak. "Gunta, she will be your personal responsibility tonight. I do not want anyone or anything to get near her. She is not a combat trained soldier and you must never forget that. Be her shadow and kill anyone who even looks at her. Halman, you and I will take care of the sentries. Let's get going before the sun decides to come up early."

When Lord Marak stepped out into the night air he inhaled deeply. There was no sweet smell of Lituk blossoms, only the fragrance of the earth and nature around him. Another pair of Botal's men were outside with six horses ready for the journey and Lord Marak gave the order to mount up. Halman led the group at a steady pace as they headed for the Litari border. The group had met previously on three different occasions and had discussed the penetration planned for this evening. It was decided to slip into the Ragatha camp from behind, rather than try a direct approach.

Lord Marak knew that by the time he reached the penetration point, Lord Zawbry's camp would be entirely surrounded by Fardale soldiers, but not close enough to disturb the sentries. Lord Zawbry would have to fight his way to the mansion in Woodville if he decided to go home in the middle of the night.

Lord Marak knew that was not going to happen.

It was a long, quiet ride as the six horses made their way through the Litari countryside and entered the Ragatha estate somewhere between Lord Zawbry's camp and the settlement of Woodville. When they reached the line of Fardale soldiers blocking Lord Zawbry's retreat path, they dismounted and gave care of their horses to the two soldiers who would not be going any further.

Lord Marak surveyed his small team and met each of their gazes before turning and leading the way through the Fardale men and into the woods. Halman moved up to walk directly behind Lord Marak while Gunta held the rear, directly behind the blacksuited Iscale.

Marshal Yenga placed his men far enough away from Lord Zawbry's sentries that no one would know they were there. As they approached the camp's perimeter, Lord Marak held up his hand and Iscale and her shadow stopped walking. Halman and Lord Marak continued forward and dropped into a crouch to observe the edge of the camp. As was hoped, the sentries on this side of the camp were careless. One of them was leaning against a tree whittling a piece of wood while the other was smoking a pipe and spending more time gazing toward the camp than the woods he was supposed to be watching.

Lord Marak knew that once Khadora got used to the idea of night attacks, sentries would no longer be this lax. The men probably thought the worst thing they would see would be an animal. They were wrong, dead wrong.

Lord Marak took a few moments to survey the camp. Lord Zawbry's huge and gaudy tent was easy to spot. Coming from the rear had given Lord Marak an additional advantage. Lord Zawbry had decided to pitch his tent as far away from the front as possible, instead of in the center of the camp.

Lord Marak signaled Halman to take the whittler while he moved toward the pipe smoker. Halman and Gunta were men from Marak's unit when he was a Squad Leader and he had worked with them before.

It was the reason he had chosen them. That prior training was needed for this penetration. No spoken commands could be issued and the blacksuited invaders had to rely on silent hand signals.

Lord Marak got into position and waited until he could confirm that Halman was ready. Marak knew his time was limited. The Air Mage stationed with the troops he had just passed through would have already sent the word of his arrival. Within moments, the entire ring of Fardale soldiers would start moving inward to capture Lord Zawbry's men.

Halman got into position and turned toward Lord Marak. Lord Marak nodded and the two men rose and hurled knives at their targets. Quickly sprinting across the distance separating them from their targets, the two blacksuited warriors grabbed at the falling bodies. Marak's target dropped his lit pipe and the Fardale Lord had to extinguish the glowing bocco before someone noticed it. Halman and Lord Marak each propped their victims against trees in a seated position. The blood pouring down their chests would make it obvious that all was not well if anyone should happen by, but from a distance they would appear to be just slacking off their guard duty.

Lord Marak signaled and Gunta brought Iscala forward. There were only three small tents between them and Lord Zawbry's tent. Lord Marak viewed the scene with his eyes attuned for any movement. Satisfied that they had a clear path to the large tent, Lord Marak led the small group forward. He halted at the rear of Lord Zawbry's tent and listened alertly. He could just hear the muffled conversation of two men and it took a moment of listening to realize that they were door guards at the front of the Ragatha Lord's tent.

Lord Marak pulled a knife and quietly slit the rear of the tent so that he could peek in. Lord Zawbry's sleeping form was the only person visible and Lord Marak cut a larger slit in the fabric. Keeping his ears tuned to the conversation of the two guards, Lord Marak slipped into the tent and was quickly followed by the other three members of his team. He signaled for Halman and Gunta to take up positions on either side of the door flap, while he crouched next to Lord Zawbry's sleeping body. Iscala positioned herself in the center of the tent and wove an Air Tube toward the Meeting Chamber in Fardale.

Once the connection to Fardale was established, Lord Marak placed his knife to Lord Zawbry's throat. The Ragatha Lord's eyes snapped open and he stared up at Lord Marak. Despite the knife at his throat, Lord Zawbry uttered a cry and the door flap was thrown open to admit the two guards. Halman and Gunta were ready for them as they ran in. Each of them quickly stepped behind their victim and grabbed his head while slicing his throat.

"Another outcry and more of your men will die," scolded Lord Marak. "The first casualty will be you, though."

Fear and hatred lanced into Lord Marak from Lord Zawbry's eyes, but the Ragatha Lord kept his voice low. "What do you want?" Lord Zawbry demanded.

Lord Marak reached into his pouch and withdrew a black headband and thrust it into Lord Zawbry's hands. "Put this over your eyes so we don't have to watch you," ordered Lord Marak.

Lord Zawbry's hate-filled eyes fixed on Lord Marak's briefly before he took the headband and placed it over his head so that his eyes were covered. "You will never get out of this camp alive," threatened Lord Zawbry.

"I seem to remember hearing those words before," chuckled Lord Marak, "but it is touching to see that you are concerned for my safety. You have a decision to make, Lord Zawbry. Do you want to live, ... or

do you want to die?"

"So, that is your game, Marak," spat Lord Zawbry. "Do you think I will call off the attack so you will let me live? I have a different deal to offer you. Leave immediately and I will spare your life when Fardale is crushed."

"You are a slow learner, Lord Zawbry," Lord Marak said coldly. "You have no Army to attack Fardale with. Surrender to me now and you will be spared along with your men. Refuse and I will deal with your successor."

"Even if I surrender to you," Lord Zawbry stated defiantly, "you will not hold me for long. What do you hope to gain?" Lord Zawbry knew that the morning would bring Lord Sevrin's men streaming into Fardale and to die tonight would be a waste of his life.

"We are running out of time," scowled Lord Marak. "Issue your Vows of Service to me or I shall leave you here dead. It is your choice, but the decision must be made now."

Lord Zawbry had barely finished giving his Vows of Service to Lord Marak when shouts erupted outside the tent. The entire camp was coming alive with shouts and frenzied replies. Lord Marak nodded to his team members and they all pulled their headbands over their eyes. Lord Marak did the same and the last thing he saw before the darkness was Lord Zawbry's pitiful smile. The Ragatha Lord obviously thought he was about to be rescued.

Suddenly, the night sky burst into blinding brightness. Even through the opaque headband and the tent walls, Lord Marak winced at the brightness that enveloped the camp. Throughout the encampment men screamed and fell down as they were blinded by the blazing light. The flash was over in an instant, but Lord Marak's eyes still held the afterglow left by the incredibly brilliant light as he peeled off his headband.

"What in the name of the Lords Council was that?" hollered Lord Zawbry.

"That was the end of your campaign to destroy Fardale," explained Lord Marak as his sight began returning to normal.

Gunta stuck his head out of the tent and raised a hand signal to Lord Marak. The signal meant that the Fardale forces were streaming into the camp from all sides and taking the Ragatha soldiers captive. Lord Marak signaled Halman to take over guarding Lord Zawbry and then left the tent.

Outside the tent, the camp was in utter chaos. Blinded men stumbled around screaming. Others crawled around looking for someone to help them. Lord Marak saw his men coming into the camp and with cool efficiency, rounding up the prisoners. Some of the Ragatha soldiers tried to fight without being able to see their enemy, but they were quickly subdued. Each Woodville soldier had his hands tied behind his back and was seated before one of the tents. Klora told him that the blindness would vary from man to man, but most of them would be blind for about an hour.

Lord Marak walked around the camp until he found Marshal Tingo. Gently lifting the Ragatha Marshal to his feet, he led him back to Lord Zawbry's tent. Once inside the tent, he seated Marshal Tingo on one of the chairs.

"Marshal Tingo is here, Lord Zawbry," Lord Marak began. "You will instruct him to issue his Vows of Service to me."

"You!" exclaimed Marshal Tingo. "I would know that voice anywhere. What kind of animal are you to blind men like this?"

"I am truly sorry to subject your men to this," stated Lord Marak, "but it would appear that their leaders were blind already. You did not even have a provocation for this attack. We have let all of your men go safely through Fardale. What kind of man are you that would attack a friendly neighbor?"

"I follow the lead of my Clan Lord, like every decent Marshal must," insisted Marshal Tingo.

"Then follow his lead now," ordered Lord Marak. "Lord Zawbry has given me his Vows of Service. It is your turn to do so."

"Is this true, Lord Zawbry?" Marshal Tingo asked. "Have you given your Vows to Lord Marak?"

Halman had to prod the Lord of Woodville to get him to respond. "I have," he conceded. "Not that it will do him any good, though."

"Nor will it do the rest of us any good, either," frowned Marshal Tingo. "A blind army will be of no use to anyone. I would give you my Vows, Lord Marak, because they are due you, but I would rather die than face life without my sight. What I can give you is warning of an attack by Lord Sevrin in the morning."

"Quiet, you fool!" exclaimed Lord Zawbry.

"You call me a fool," accused Marshal Tingo. "You swear allegiance to a man and do not tell him that he is to be attacked in the morning. Do your Vows mean nothing to you? Have you no honor at all?"

"Your blindness is temporary, Marshal," informed Lord Marak. "You will regain your sight in about an hour. As for Lord Zawbry having any honor, I think the answer is obvious. Woodville will need a new Lord in the morning."

"Are you not listening?" cried Marshal Tingo. "Two thousand men are going to swarm into Fardale in the morning from the East. They will run over Fardale like it is a picnic basket and they are the ants. You and your men will be devoured."

"That is something I will deal with in the morning," declared Lord Marak. "I have known of your plan for some time and I am ready for Lord Sevrin and his Army. Are you ready to give me your Vows?"

"You shall have my Vows and the Vows of my men," affirmed Marshal Tingo, "but only when I can look you in the eye. I do not doubt your word, Lord Marak, but there is a chance that you are mistaken. If that is the case, I would prefer to die."

"Fair enough," accepted Lord Marak. "I will not expect your men to fight against the other Ragatha Clan Armies, but I must be assured that they will not hinder my attack. If there are men among your force who would give their Vows and not expect to honor them, like Lord Zawbry, you must identify them so they can be isolated from the rest."

"They will honor their Vows," insisted Marshal Tingo. "In fact, you would honor us if you would allow us to deliver justice to Lord Zawbry for his duplicity."

"I will leave his fate in your hands," agreed Lord Marak. "He is not fit to rule Woodville. I need to survey the camp. When your sight returns, come and find me so I may accept your Vows of Service. Do not delay because my time is short here."

Lord Marak strode out of the tent to inspect his new Army. They would not see him observing them, but he knew Marshal Tingo was right. They would take their Vows and they would honor them. Only the Lords of Khadora seemed to think the Vows were breakable. That, too, would change. The Born Warrior would instruct the Lords.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 21

The Pits

The first lightening of the sky arose before Lord Marak as he galloped eastward toward the new battle lines. Off in the distance he could see the thick, billowing fog as it lay hugging the ground. He knew the fog was not natural, but the enemy didn't. Lord Sevrin would feel compelled to attack this morning even through the fog. If he failed to come to Lord Zawbry's aid, he stood a chance of losing Woodville. Lord Marak smiled slightly as he pondered what Lord Sevrin's reaction would be if he knew he had already lost Woodville. The last thing Lord Marak saw when he left the Woodville camp was Lord Zawbry hanging from a tree. Marshal Tingo and his men had less stomach for a liar than Lord Marak did himself.

Lord Marak slowed as he approached his own soldiers. Lectain Zorkil was manning the communications in the Meeting Chamber this morning. Marshal Yenga wanted to be on the field for this battle. Lord Marak saw the tall figure and headed for him. The Marshal's aide pointed to Lord Marak and everyone's head swiveled. The aide took his horse as Lord Marak dismounted and walked over to Marshal Yenga.

"Lord Zawbry's camp took longer than I cared for," explained Lord Marak. "How are the preparations proceeding?"

"Very well, so far," answered Marshal Yenga. Their camp is up and moving around. They aren't trying to be quiet. I guess they think we are too busy at the Woodville border to be concerned about what happens out here."

"Do you think we will be able to split them up?" inquired Lord Marak.

"I certainly hope so," remarked Marshal Yenga. "If we don't, there will be a tremendous amount of blood spilled today and a fair bit of it will be ours. Couldn't you pull one of your commando raids on them and avoid this battle?"

"We have been through this before," sighed Lord Marak. "I would love to do just that, but I would never get near Lord Sevrin. This is not the army of one estate, although it may be when we get done. Are the trenches holding up?"

"They are," confirmed Marshal Yenga. "I had them checked just a few moments ago. They feel as firm as the earth on either side of them. Someday I want to know how that is done."

"It's really pretty simple," remarked Lord Marak. "The pressure of the air in the trenches is great enough

to keep the turf from dropping. Once the pressure is released, the soil suspended over the trench will suddenly drop to the bottom."

"I'll have to take your word for that," replied Marshal Yenga while shaking his head. "We are still going to have a problem getting them to go the way we want them to."

"That, Marshal Yenga, is your job," frowned Lord Marak. "The more men you can lure into these traps, the less we will have to kill. I wish you the greatest success. Have you talked with the Litari and Sorgan Clans this morning?"

"I have, and they are right where they are supposed to be," nodded Marshal Yenga. "The Ragatha Army is not going to get around us. I just hope they don't go over our bodies."

"If they do, you are fired," chuckled Lord Marak. "Is there anything to eat around here?"

The Marshal's aide nodded and hurried off to fetch some food for the Fardale Lord. "Is there any way you can determine where Lord Sevrin is in that mess?" probed Lord Marak.

"None," lamented Marshal Yenga. "I have never met the man and wouldn't know his voice from anyone else's."
* * * *

Deep within the billowing fog, Lord Sevrin was holding council with his Lord Marshal, Orteka. "We can not wait for this infernal fog to lift," reasoned Lord Sevrin. "Lord Zawbry was to have started his attack yesterday. If we fail to move forward and attack the rear of the Fardale forces, we will lose too many of our Woodville soldiers."

"I understand the need to move forward," retorted Lord Marshal Orteka, "but we can not see where we are going. Surely the fog will lift within an hour and that small amount of time will have no bearing on the outcome of the battle."

"And if it doesn't lift on schedule?" queried Lord Sevrin. "Will you then request another hour? The battle is taking place quite a distance from here. I am just suggesting that we move forward slowly. Maybe we can get out of the fog and regroup."

"Very well," replied Lord Marshal Orteka. "I will lead the men forward myself. I don't want to get so close to the Fardale forces that we will be noticed before we regroup."

"Do it whichever way you want," agreed Lord Sevrin, "just get us out of this fog."

"As you command, My Lord," saluted Lord Marshal Orteka.

Lord Marshal Orteka left the tent and strode over to the gathering of his Marshals. "Lord Sevrin has ordered us to proceed," he stated. "Each of us is going to lead our own forces until we regroup outside the fog. I do not want anyone getting within sight of the Fardale Army. If this fog stretches all of the way to Woodville, we will avoid contact with the enemy until we regroup. Is that understood?"

Lord Marshal Orteka waited until each of the Marshals indicated his acknowledgement of the orders before continuing. "We will break into four units for the move forward," he continued. "Move slowly and carefully. I do not want to hear any shouts because a man has fallen and broken his leg. Remember that sound travels far in a fog such as this. The first group to find air clear of this fog is to stop and report

back to me so the rest of us can head in that direction. Do remember that this is supposed to be a surprise attack."

The Marshals nodded and headed toward their respective units. Lord Marshal Orteka shook his head as he related the plan to his Lectains and waited patiently while they informed their Cortains. Within five minutes the Ragatha Army was on the move, creeping forward at a cautious pace. Each footstep was carefully placed and each man tried to maintain a constant distance from his neighbor. Had the fog not existed, one would have been impressed with the line of advancing men that stretched across a broad front from one side of the valley to the other.

Lord Marshal Orteka was not the type of officer who would ask his men to do something that he would not do, so he marched near the head of his troops. Only the forward scouts preceded him.

The fog appeared to be endless and the march dragged on. Lord Marshal Orteka was grateful that the Situ from Lituk Valley were not going to be involved in this battle. If he had not received assurances of their neutrality, he would have been extremely nervous with his back exposed in the thick fog. With a sigh of relief, Lord Marshal Orteka quickened his step as the brightness increased before him. Knowing he would be out of this infernal fog brightened his spirits.

Lord Marshal Orteka saw his forward scouts halt and he hurried to move toward them. As he stepped out of the fog he realized why his scouts had stopped. Arrayed before him was the entire Fardale Army with their shields reflecting the rising sun directly into his face. Lord Marshal Orteka glanced left and right to view the units of the other Marshals under his command. The fog appeared to cut off in a straight line and he saw the long line of troops extending from both his right and left sides.

For a long moment, nobody moved. Not a sound was heard from the two massed Armies facing each other. Lord Marshal Orteka's plan of regrouping after the fog was hopeless but, still, he wielded a potent army and he had clear, numerical superiority over his enemy. Lord Marshal Orteka shouted as loud as he could. His command to charge echoed in the stillness of the valley as his men surged forward.

Lord Marshal Orteka stood his ground as his men raced past him, raced into the dazzling blindness of the sun-reflecting shields. At first, Lord Marshal Orteka mistook the screams for the cries of clashing soldiers, but he soon noticed that the Fardale Army was just standing there and not fighting. He also recognized with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach that his men were not reaching the Fardale enemy. They were simply disappearing.

Lord Marshal Orteka shouted for his men to stop, but his shouts were drowned out by the mounting roar of men screaming their last breath. He finally succeeded in getting his surging troops to halt. He stopped those rushing past him and had them stop their neighbors until the rush ceased.

The Fardale soldiers remained passive and held their reflecting shields securely. Lord Marshal Orteka slowly walked forward, pushing his way through the knot of Ragatha soldiers ahead of him. When he reached the front line of his troops, he stared in horror at the wide trench before him. Extending up from the base of the trench were sharpened sticks and the bodies of his Ragatha soldiers were impaled upon those sticks. He surveyed the moat of destruction with a mixture of disgust and fear. Looking to his right and his left, Lord Marshal Orteka saw that the trench extended to the limits of his sight. Far off to his left, he continued to hear the screams of soldiers falling into the trench and silently cursed the Marshal in charge of those men for allowing his men to continue forward.

The voice Lord Marshal Orteka heard could have come from someone standing next to him. "This is Lord Marak of Fardale speaking," the voice stated simply. "I demand the surrender of your forces. I

have no wish to inflict more carnage upon your men. Surrender now and your men will be accepted into our fold."

Lord Marshal Orteka straightened and peered into the opposing forces. A tall, muscular, black clad man stood defiantly on the other side of the trench staring back at him. Cocking his head, Lord Marshal Orteka wondered if the black specter was the origin of the voice. The man did not wear the green and yellow of the Situ Clan like the rest of the soldiers across from him. He watched the black nightmare across from him and saw his lips move as the voice continued.

"Why subject your men to a needless death?" whispered the voice. "Woodville will not be coming to your aid. Lord Zawbry has already submitted and Woodville is mine. Throw down your weapons and surrender."

Lord Marshal Orteka scowled at the enemy and shouted an order for his archers to kill the man in black. Scores of arrows arched into the air towards the enemy line. Lord Marshal Orteka watched with a wicked grin upon his face. If the black clad fool thought his army was defeated because there was a trench between him and his enemy, he was sadly mistaken. The Ragatha Army had some of the finest archers in Khadora.

An expression of shock and disbelief illuminated Lord Marshal Orteka's face as the arrows halted in the air and dropped into the trench. He ordered another volley and another, as the arrows continued to fall into the trench, piercing the bodies of the men who had the misfortune to lead the charge against the Fardale Army. It was not until the third volley failed to reach its target that Lord Marshal Orteka realized his hair was blowing in the stiff head wind. Cursing his luck, Lord Marshal Orteka ordered a retreat.

Before Lord Marshal Orteka reached Lord Sevrin and his personal guards, he heard the Lord's shouting. If Lord Sevrin thought he was going to order his men forward across the trench, Lord Marshal Orteka would straighten him out. He was not going to throw away the lives of his men filling a trench for others to walk across.

"There you are," shouted Lord Sevrin. "What is going on? Why are your men retreating?"

"We can not reach the enemy," explained Lord Marshal Orteka. "They have dug a wide trench and filled it with sharpened sticks. Quite a few of my men discovered it too late. There is such a strong headwind that our arrows can not reach the enemy, either. We are better off retreating and regrouping before we attack."

"We can not retreat," declared Lord Sevrin. "Woodville is depending on us."

"If Lord Marak can be believed," continued Lord Marshal Orteka, "Woodville has already fallen. I can not verify it, but it looks like we are facing the entire Fardale Army. I don't think anyone would be so foolish as to amass his army out here against us if he knew he still had an enemy behind him."

"How could that be possible?" questioned Lord Sevrin. "Lord Zawbry had instructions not to engage in an all out battle. He was only supposed to skirmish with Lord Marak."

"It may be that this Lord Marak is more clever than Lord Zawbry thought," posed Lord Marshal Orteka. "Certainly the trenches were an ingenious idea. I do not wish to underestimate my foe. We need to retreat and regroup to take the advantage away from Lord Marak."

"Are we going to let five hundred men rout us?" quizzed Lord Sevrin. "Surely, you can devise a way to

get across the trench."

"I will get us across the trench," assured Lord Marshal Orteka, "but I will not be able to do it while they are watching me from the other side. His men will not pursue us. They are not strong enough nor do I think our opponent is that foolish."

"Very well," conceded Lord Sevrin, "but I will not leave Woodville in Lord Marak's hands."

Lord Marshal Orteka sent runners to inform the other Marshals of his plan and scout out the path of retreat. He turned his efforts to plotting a new attack plan while he waited for the runners to return. This was not the only entrance to Fardale which his Army could take, but it afforded the easiest path to Fardale. He was turning his attentions to the other routes when the first of the runners returned.

"Lord Marshal," the runner panted. "I can not reach the other Marshals. The trench extends between us."

Lord Marshal Orteka stared at the young runner with disbelief. Before he could reply, another runner appeared and issued a similar statement. Lord Marshal Orteka could not believe his ears. His men had marched over the area of the trenches not long ago and, even in the fog, the trenches could not be missed. The runners scouting the retreat path also appeared.

"There are trenches all around us," declared one of the scouts. "The Sorgan Army blocks our path out of the valley. We're surrounded."

"The Sorgan Army?" puzzled Lord Marshal Orteka. "Why are they getting involved in this?"

Without waiting for an answer, Lord Marshal Orteka ordered the scout to show him the Sorgan Army and followed the young man through the fog. After a relatively short trek, Lord Marshal Orteka stood at the edge of the trench gazing at the Sorgan Army amassed on the other side. Like their Situ counterparts, the Sorgan soldiers stood passively with their shields before them. Unlike the Situ, the sun was at the Sorgan Army's back and was not reflecting off their shields. Once again, Lord Marshal Orteka felt the air blowing his hair. This really confused the Lord Marshal. A wind could blow East or it could blow West, but he had never experienced a wind that always blew towards him.

Determined to find answers to his puzzling questions, Lord Marshal Orteka made his way back to where Lord Marak stood. Walking out of the fog, Lord Marshal Orteka stood defiantly on the edge of the trench.

"What are you playing at?" shouted Lord Marshal Orteka. "Why is the Sorgan Clan involved in this conflict?"

Lord Marak's voice returned with the same strange quality of coming from right alongside Lord Marshal Orteka. "Why are the Ragatha Clans assembled here?" asked Lord Marak. "You have come to take what is mine. I am here to take what is yours. Throw down your weapons and surrender. There is no escape for your men. You are surrounded."

"You may block both ends of the valley," shouted Lord Marshal Orteka, "but I will not surrender. We will defeat you and the Sorgan Clan and use your bodies to fill this trench of yours."

Lord Marak turned and said something to a woman behind him. The headwind on Lord Marshal Orteka increased with such fury that the Lord Marshal had trouble maintaining his stance. When he turned his

head to avoid the wind, he saw that the fog had lifted. He filled his eyes with the might of the Ragatha Army before catching a glint in the hills above the valley. He stared at the line of soldiers above the valley and squinted to make out their colors.

"It is the Litari Army," the voice explained. "They are on both sides of you. You take a great deal of convincing, Lord Marshal. I know that flights of our arrows will speed your decision, but I am loathe to kill soldiers that will be mine before the day is out. You have half an hour to make your decision. After that, I will do what I must do to secure your surrender or defeat. Use your time wisely."

Lord Marshal Orteka hurried back towards Lord Sevrin. He noticed the dividing trenches between himself and the men of the other Ragatha estates and wondered how they had been made. He found Lord Sevrin arguing with the group of runners he had left behind.

"Lord Sevrin," he began, "we are, indeed, surrounded. The Sorgan Army blocks our retreat and the Litari Army holds the high ground on each side of the valley. Whatever we have heard about this Lord Marak, he has a way of solving his problems by making allies out of his enemies. We are in serious trouble."

"Even with his puny allies," Lord Sevrin debated, "what is that compared to the entire Ragatha Clan? You have two thousand men, Lord Marshal. Fill the trenches with dirt and get us out of here."

"An excellent idea," retorted Lord Marshal Orteka, "if we had time to do it. The enemy has not fired a single shot at us yet, but Lord Marak has given us half an hour to surrender. If we do not, I believe he will start cutting down our men."

"The Ragatha Clan has the finest archers in Khadora," declared Lord Sevrin. "If they want an archery fight, we are well suited for it."

"Yesterday I would have agreed with you," commented Lord Marshal Orteka, "but we can not shoot into the wind while their arrows are raining down on us. I think you should parley with Lord Marak."

"Surely, you can chose a side where the wind favors us," insisted Lord Sevrin. "It doesn't matter which direction we go as long as we break free from these trenches."

"I do not understand it," admitted Lord Marshal Orteka, "but the wind is coming at us from all directions. I would suspect magic, but I have never heard of such a use for it. It is ingenious."

"You sound like you admire this Lord Marak," scolded Lord Sevrin. "Remember, your job is to kill him."

"I will do my job as directed," straightened Lord Marshal Orteka, "but I cannot help admiring the architect of this trap. He has bottled up a superior force and made us helpless. We can not even communicate with the rest of our forces without shouting across his trenches. I have never surrendered in my entire career and I will not now without your leave, but I would not be truthful if I told you that I saw a way out of this. I fear that we will lose all of our men trying and still not succeed."

"You are serious," remarked Lord Sevrin. "I have never known you to balk at a battle, even when you faced overwhelming odds. I will talk with Lord Marak and ask the price for our release."

Lord Marshal Orteka accompanied Lord Sevrin to the trench across from Lord Marak. "Lord Marak," shouted Lord Sevrin, "I am Lord Sevrin, head of the Ragatha Clan. What is it you want to remove your

men?"

"You have no need of shouting, Lord Sevrin," replied the calm and close voice. "I can hear you just fine. What I want is the complete surrender of the Ragatha Clan. Are you prepared to offer it?"

"I will give you Woodville in return for safe exit from this trap," bargained Lord Sevrin. "Certainly, you will agree that the offer is generous."

"I already own Woodville," answered Lord Marak. "You have attacked Fardale without provocation. Only your complete surrender will satisfy me. I would prefer it if the surrender was bloodless, but I am determined to have it, in any event."

"You speak a falsehood," accused Lord Sevrin. "We have provocation. You have revoked an agreement made in good faith with your predecessor. I am willing to put this matter before the Lords Council and let them decide. There is no need for bloodshed. My army will camp here and await an emissary."

"You have been misinformed," corrected Lord Marak. "Fardale has not revoked the agreement, nor have we attempted to stop Lord Zawbry from using Fardale land for transit. Lord Zawbry saw an opportunity to seize my land and took it. Unfortunately, Lord Zawbry is no longer available to explain the situation to you, but I do have Marshal Tingo available."

Marshal Tingo stepped forward and confirmed Lord Marak's words. Lord Marshal Orteka fixed Lord Sevrin with his eyes and shook his head. "I now believe the devious circumstances that have brought us together out here on the battlefield," conceded Lord Sevrin, "but I still have a problem with your demands. Your own Situ brothers had foreknowledge of our intentions to attack Fardale. I will not submit my people to their rule. They are no better than Lord Zawbry and they deserve his fate. You ask something of me, Lord Marak, that I can not give you. Better my people should die than to be ruled by Lords without honor. Let your arrows fly."

"I have not made demands that are onerous to you, Lord Sevrin," insisted Lord Marak. "I do not propose joining you to the Situ Clan. You will continue to rule the Ragatha estates with the exception of Woodville, which will be mine. I will demand Vows of Service from every Ragatha clansman including yourself, but the Vows will be given to me, not the Situ Clan."

"But you are a Situ," protested Lord Sevrin. "If Lord Ridak can control you, he controls everyone whom you control."

"Lord Ridak has no control over me," declared Lord Marak. "I am Lord Marak of the Torak Clan and you have heard me state so. Lord Ridak is no better than Lord Zawbry and he does deserve the same fate. I intend to see that he receives it."

Lord Sevrin and Lord Marshal Orteka whispered between themselves for a few moments before responding. "A Vow of Service to you," Lord Sevrin asked, "makes the Lord of the Ragatha Clan your subject. Do you plan to exercise control over the Ragatha Clan?"

"I do," admitted Lord Marak. "I do not intend to manage your estates, Lord Sevrin, but I do plan to change some of the ways you operate. I will expect you to utilize your expertise to enact my reforms. I believe that you will find life actually better for yourself and your subjects after my reforms and I will try to give you as much control over the Ragatha Clan as I can. You will remain a separate Clan and you will retain your seat in the Assembly of Lords. I have similar arrangements with the Sorgan Clan and the Litari

Clan and it is working quite well. Do you accept?"

Lord Sevrin turned and reviewed his mighty Army. He stood silent for a long time as he balanced the thought of being subject to Lord Marak's control versus the death of his men. In the end, he realized that Lord Marak would rule the Ragatha Clan in either event.

"I accept, Lord Marak," Lord Sevrin finally replied.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 22

Sword of Torak

Fardale was overcrowded with the Ragatha soldiers. Lord Marak had dispatched one thousand of the red and yellow soldiers to Woodville, but the other fifteen hundred had to erect tents and the Fardale estate resembled the overflow area during the festival days. After the initial confusion, a circus-like atmosphere developed and the Ragatha soldiers mixed freely with the people of Fardale. Some of the Ragatha soldiers wielded musical instruments and the children of Fardale hung around the encampment and ran errands for the visiting soldiers. The ultimate prize for performing an especially hard chore was a pair of the red and yellow feathers which symbolized the Ragatha Clan.

Yenga, who had finally accepted the title of Lord Marshal of the Torak Clan, hosted the other Marshals. Marshal Tingo was told that he would remain the Marshal of Woodville and would be reporting directly to Lord Marshal Yenga. Lord Marshal Orteka probed Yenga about the use of magic as a battlefield weapon and continually asked questions about the trenches and wind currents which were employed against him. Lord Marshal Yenga freely discussed Lord Marak's fighting techniques and set up demonstrations for the visiting Ragatha soldiers.

Lord Marak spent a great deal of time with Lord Sevrin. The Lord of the Ragatha Clan adapted quickly to his new status after Lord Marak discussed the reforms he wanted to make. Lord Sevrin actually became enthusiastic about the reforms when he observed the former slaves of Fardale working and participating in all manner of Clan life. Like most Khadoran Lords, Lord Sevrin had been taught the necessity of slavery, but unlike most of the other Lords, he did not enjoy enslaving people.

The evening after the battle, Lord Marak lay awake in his bed staring at the ceiling. He should have been very content with his stunning victory, but the problems still facing him rolled through his mind. Foremost on his mind was Cortain Rybak. He must devise a plan to get Rybak free of Lituk Valley, but short of a full-scale confrontation, no plan emerged. He also needed to make a trip to the Ragatha estates to receive his Vows of Service and find a new Lord for Woodville.

There was also Lord Ridak's reaction to worry about. Lord Marak learned of Lord Marshal Grefon's assurances that the Situ would stay out of the battle. Lord Marak no longer had any qualms about raising his Torak banner over Fardale and Woodville, but Lord Ridak would not accept the loss of Fardale easily. There were times in history when a Clan Lord did not fight to keep one of his estates, but Lord Marak had never heard of one where the Lord Marshal guaranteed in advance that the Clan would not respond. It was now clear to everyone involved that Lord Ridak was through with Lord Marak.

Lord Marak jumped at the sound of a creaking board and sprang out of bed, grabbing his sword from the stand next to the bed as he rolled across the floor. Lord Marak saw a tall man in the doorway holding

a wicked, sinuous sword in his hand and prepared to attack.

"Perhaps my manners could be better," whispered the voice from the doorway, "but your house appears to be full of people I would rather not meet."

Lord Marak eased his posture and lowered his sword as he recognized the voice. "If this was a test of my reflexes," sighed Lord Marak, "rest assured you have eased a few years off my life."

"My apologies," chuckled Tmundo. "I wanted to congratulate you on your victories today. You do not find time to visit anymore."

"I would like to," answered Lord Marak, "but life is so busy these days. Sometimes I yearn for the simple days of a soldier, but when I do, I think of my mother as a slave again."

"An effective remedy for such thoughts..." smiled Tmundo as Lord Marak lit a candle. "I have brought something which belongs to you."

Lord Marak turned and saw Tmundo holding out the sinuous sword to him. "This is the Sword of Torak," declared Tmundo. "Is it a sword worthy of a warrior ... and you are a warrior worthy of it. Use it as the symbol of the Torak Clan. Make it synonymous with freedom and honor."

Lord Marak hefted the wicked-looking sword and admired the craftsmanship. "You honor me with your gift, Leader of the Kywara," accepted Lord Marak. "Why do I get the feeling that there is more to the meaning of Torak than you are telling me?"

"When you visit next," offered Tmundo, "I will explain the significance of Torak to you. Until then, trust in your instincts. You will know what to do and when to do it."

"I wish I had the confidence in me that others seem to have," sighed Lord Marak. "All I can see are the problems which I have not solved. One of my Cortains lies in Lituk Valley while I celebrate my victories."

"Why do you tell me of this?" quizzed Tmundo. "You have the skills to retrieve him. Why do you hesitate?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Lord Marak. "It feels like I would be attacking my own home and I do not have provocation for an attack."

"You are still playing by the flatlanders' rules," sighed Tmundo. "Is it not provocation enough when they enslave other people? Do they have a right to seize your courier and torture him? Do they not wish you dead? Stop playing by their rules, young Marak. They are wrong and you are right. Go, get what is yours and teach them not to take your things again. Unless you are strong and firm, the flatlanders will keep taking what is yours. This is the way the Kywara live and it is the reason we have survived."

"If I ignore the flatlander rules," protested Lord Marak, "they will unite against me."

"They will do so anyway," explained Tmundo. "They will not accept your reforms without being forced to. Limit your enemies by playing their game for a while, but discard the rules with selected opponents. Make no mistake about my advice, young Marak. Lord Ridak is your opponent. One of you will live and the other will die. Which role do you wish to fulfill?"

"Why do the Kywara accept me?" asked Lord Marak. "You do not deal with flatlanders and yet you

bring me gifts and advice. Why do you see me as being different from the others?"

Tmundo stared at the floor as if in a trance for a few moments before answering. "You are Torak," stated Tmundo. "Until you understand that, there is little I can explain. You will bring honor to the flatlanders and the Chula need that honor to survive. No Chula will stand against you as long as you remain faithful to the honor of Torak. There is nothing more I can explain at the moment."

Lord Marak heard a sound outside in the hall and stuck his head out to investigate. When he turned back to his room, Tmundo was gone. He picked up the Sword of Torak and placed it on his stand before crawling into bed.

The next day Lord Marak hosted a reception and asked the Marshals and Lords of the Sorgan Clan and the Litari Clan to attend. At the reception Lord Marak unveiled the new uniform of the Torak Clan, a completely black outfit with a silver headband, waistband and wrist bands. The waistband sported a silver circle with the Sword of Torak embroidered within it.

"The silver is a nice touch," chuckled Lord Marshal Orteka. "The first time I saw you I would have appreciated something to break up all that black. I wasn't sure if you were human or if the fog had disturbed my vision."

Lord Quavry of Watula Valley mumbled something under his breath and Lord Marak noted that the overweight Sorgan Lord did not fit in well with the rest of the people assembled. Lord Burdine had gotten over his early queasiness about serving under Lord Marak and Lord Sevrin actually seemed eager to get the reforms underway. Lord Quavry, alone, still balked at changing his ways. Lord Marak noted to keep a close eye on his Sorgan Lord. Perhaps he would have time to speak with Marshal Patoga before the Sorgans left the reception. Marshal Patoga wholeheartedly accepted Lord Marak's reforms and Lord Marshal Yenga commented on the blossoming character of his old Lectain Patoga.

Lord Burdine and Lord Sevrin actually got along well. Their Clans had been bitter enemies ever since Woodville was founded. Lord Marak wondered how things would have worked out if the two of them had sat down and talked when the hostilities first erupted. He suspected that Lord Zawbry decided to use his sword instead of his mouth and had managed to sabotage any chance of a peaceful agreement.

That was one Ragatha clansman whom Lord Marak would not miss.

Seneschal Pito entered the reception flourishing a long, black cape with a silver border and sporting a large, silver circle with the Sword of Torak in it on the back. To a round of applause and murmurs of appreciation, Seneschal Pito attached the cape to Lord Marak's uniform. Two bearers behind the Seneschal carried a new black sheath and the Sword of Torak. Lord Marak hefted the Sword of Torak and held it high as the room buzzed with exclamations of appreciation and awe.

"This is the Sword of Torak," Lord Marak proclaimed. "It is the symbol of the Torak Clan. With it I will restore honor and freedom to Khadora."

The room was silent and Lord Marak flushed trying to figure out where his words had come from. He did not intend to make a speech about the Sword of Torak. He merely planned to show it to explain the new Clan symbol, but the words just flowed out of his mouth.

Suddenly, Lord Marshal Yenga drew his sword and raised it high. "To Lord Marak, Lord of the Torak Clan!" he exclaimed. "To the Sword of Torak and freedom and honor!"

They broke into a spontaneous salute to Lord Marak as everyone who had a sword raised it in a salute.

Those who did not have a sword raised their hands while uttering the words. Only Lord Quavry appeared indifferent to the salute.

Lord Marak left the reception early and corralled Lord Marshal Yenga outside the mansion. "I am going to Lituk Valley tonight," Lord Marak declared. "Cortain Rybak has been held long enough."

Rather than the argument Lord Marak expected, Lord Marshal Yenga simply nodded. "Take Gunta and Halman with you," he insisted. "I have placed scouts in the hills. Take their horses when you get there. You can retrieve yours on the way back."

"You've kept up the bandits?" chuckled Lord Marak.

"Do you know of a better way to catch Situ spies?" laughed Lord Marshal Yenga. "I will keep everyone here entertained. If you are not back in two days, I will lead all of the armies who owe allegiance to you into Lituk Valley."

"Two days is a rather narrow corridor," protested Lord Marak.

"I think it is too long for you to be missing," insisted Lord Marshal Yenga. "I know better than to try to stop you, but I will not be remiss by waiting too long. If you are a little bit late in getting back, you will not have trouble finding four thousand men heading toward Lituk Valley. You can alter my orders then."

"Two days," promised Lord Marak, "but the horses will be worthless after the trip."

"Horses we can spare," remarked Lord Marshal Yenga, "the Lord of the Torak Clan, we can not. Ride safely and return swiftly." He snapped his fingers and Gunta and Halman emerged from the shadows. They were already outfitted in the new uniforms of the Torak Clan and were ready to ride."

"How did you know?" demanded Lord Marak.

"It is my duty to anticipate the moves of others before they occur," smiled Lord Marshal Yenga. "I had hoped you would allow me to send Gunta and Halman alone, but I was prepared for your decision to go with them."

Lord Marak smiled and nodded his appreciation as the three black clad warriors headed for the stables. Three horses stood ready and the warriors mounted and galloped to the East. They rode long into the night before Gunta called a halt.

"We are in the area of the bandits," Gunta explained. "We do not want to be skewered by our own men."

Gunta dismounted and led his weary horse forward. Lord Marak and Halman dismounted and followed Gunta's lead. Five minutes into their walk, an arrow streaked downward and stuck in the ground in front of Gunta.

"You are surrounded," shouted an unseen voice. "Identify yourselves or prepare to die."

"I am Gunta Torak," shouted Gunta. "I accompany Lord Marak. We have need of three fresh horses."

Lord Marak waited tensely as nobody answered. Looking from Gunta to Halman, he filled both hands with Omunga Stars and prepared to move into the darkness. Gunta shook his head and Lord Marak

halted. Suddenly, Lord Marak heard the sounds of horses approaching and whirled to see one of his men leading three horses along the path they had just traversed.

"Sorry, Lord Marak," the bandit apologized. "Lord Marshal Yenga said some riders would be coming tonight, but we didn't recognize the new uniforms."

"I am glad you were cautious enough to check before you punctured us with arrows," responded Lord Marak. "We should be coming back tomorrow or the next day. Is there some signal we can use to avoid a mistake?"

"Have you ever heard a marsh owl?" asked the bandit.

Lord Marak nodded and imitated the call. "Excellent," remarked the bandit. "Give that call on your way back. Start it about a half hour east of here. We do not stay in the same place for obvious reasons. We will hear it and have your refreshed mounts ready."

"We will need four mounts upon our return," instructed Lord Marak optimistically.

The bandit nodded as the three warriors transferred their gear to the new mounts and resumed their journey eastward. Gunta kept up a hectic pace, but the sky began to pale before they reached Lituk Valley. Lord Marak called a halt and dismounted.

"We will not have enough time to accomplish our goal tonight," declared Lord Marak. "Let's rest the animals and decide on a plan of attack."

"If we could leave the horses here," speculated Halman, "we would have fresher mounts tomorrow night when we are being chased. Do you think we could steal horses out of their stable? We could abandon them here and take these mounts back."

"That is not a bad idea," commented Lord Marak, "but it increases our exposure. Getting Rybak out will be tricky enough without trying to steal horses."

"Plus," added Gunta, "if we fail to get horses, it will be a long walk back to here. They will probably be pursuing us when we escape."

"If they know where to look for us," smiled Lord Marak.

"If they know it was us," figured Halman, "they will head straight this way. They will probably get here before us if we don't have horses."

"But if they don't know it was us," commented Gunta, "they will search in every direction for Rybak."

"I am going to make sure that Lord Marshal Grefon knows who freed Cortain Rybak," laughed Lord Marak. "We are heading north towards River's Bend. We can travel slowly as long as we keep off the roads. We are going to need rest before dark, but we will not have a full day's journey ahead of us."

Gunta and Halman exchanged puzzled looks, but they shrugged and followed Lord Marak. It took the entire morning to find the exact spot Lord Marak was searching for, but once they saw it, Gunta and Halman smiled.

They were at a cave alongside the river less than an hour's ride north of Lituk Valley. Marak had

brought his Squad here to rest during one of their survival training outings. They were coming back from a trip to the swamps downstream and the evening turned into a small festival of sorts with a campfire at the mouth of the cave and several of the soldiers playing flutes while the others sang. Lord Marak's thoughts drifted back to those carefree days with a warmth reserved for memories.

The three warriors brought their horses into the cave and prepared for sleep. The cave was not near the road and there was little chance of anyone stumbling along and finding them here. As soon as nightfall arrived, the three warriors left the cave and started walking towards Lituk Valley. They kept to the woods and proceeded quietly through the forest as they turned their silver headbands, wristbands and waistband inside out to hide the silver.

As they neared the estate, Lord Marak halted frequently and listened for signs of patrols. Lord Marshal Grefon was not big on nighttime patrols during times of peace and Lord Marak noted that he hadn't changed his procedures. They spotted only one patrol although Lord Marak realized there would be another on the other side of the estate. The patrol was easy to get around and soon the three warriors were in the heart of the orchards. Here the risky part of their mission would begin.

The layout of Lord Ridak's estate placed the barracks towards the front of the property. That necessitated an entry from the rear of the mansion. Unfortunately, that path would mean crossing the barren fields which were not yet producing lituks. Lord Marak did not look forward to the long exposure necessary to cross the open terrain and he certainly would not attempt it until later in the night. Too many soldiers and servants would have a clear view of the open fields and the warriors would have to wait until they turned in for the night.

The three warriors stretched out prone under the lituk trees, each facing a different direction, and waited for the estate to go to sleep. They saw the patrol go by several times, but the Situ soldiers never entered the orchards.

Finally, when the estate was quiet, Lord Marak tapped his two team members and pointed towards the mansion. Gunta rose and ran quietly to the side of the mansion and threw himself into the darkness alongside it. Halman rose next and duplicated the short run. By the time Lord Marak made it to the building, Gunta had already crawled to the corner of the mansion and was peering around the corner. Lord Marak followed Halman to the corner of the building.

Attacking Lituk Valley had one distinctive benefit. Lord Marak knew the grounds and he knew where the kitchen was. He also knew the kitchen should be empty. He eased up alongside Gunta and saw why the warrior had not pressed on further. The second patrol was slacking off. Unfortunately, they were exercising their laxness behind the mansion, right where Lord Marak did not want them. Lord Marak tried to remember what little he knew about the layout of the interior of the mansion and came up with disturbing answers. The only window on this side of the mansion that he could be sure of was Lord Marshal Grefon's suite.

With time running out and no sign of the second patrol suddenly gaining any initiative to do their duty properly, Lord Marak decided to enter the mansion through Lord Marshal Grefon's sitting room. After relaying his decision to Gunta and Halman, Lord Marak headed back along the side of the building to the proper window. Lord Marak reached up and tested the shutters and found them unlocked. He eased them open and pulled himself up and into the Lord Marshal's sitting room. Silently he padded his way across the room to the door to the sleeping chamber and waited.

Halman pulled himself in next and immediately moved to the door to the hallway. Gunta entered and stood looking at the other two for any signs of a problem. The door to Grefon's study stood open and

the room was obviously unoccupied. Halman eased open the door to the hallway and peered out. He nodded vigorously and slipped out the door. Gunta followed close behind and Lord Marak waited until both of them had left the room before he abandoned his post by Grefon's sleeping chamber.

The door to downstairs was under the grand staircase leading upstairs and Lord Marak found his two compatriots waiting for him when he arrived.

"One of you should remain here," whispered Lord Marak. "Keep an eye out for anyone who might get in the way when we are leaving. Do not kill unless you have to."

Gunta eased open the door to the lower level and slipped through it to the stairs leading down. Lord Marak followed him and Halman stepped inside, but kept the door cracked so he could see out. Gunta stepped slowly and cautiously as he moved down the stairs. He stopped at the bottom and peeked around the corner and held up two fingers. Lord Marak thought quickly and tapped Gunta on the shoulder. Gunta moved back and let Lord Marak assume his position.

Cortain Koors and the jailer sat at a table drinking ale and talking up a storm. The jailer was normally positioned so that he could see the captives as well as the stairway, but Koors' massive form was blocking his view. Lord Marak touched Gunta's pouch where he kept his Omunga Stars and then stepped down the last step to the floor of the dungeon. Quietly, and in a crouch, Lord Marak stole across the room towards the back of Cortain Koors.

The jailer must have sensed something because he suddenly leaped to his feet, but Lord Marak had already gotten close enough to accomplish his goal. He stepped up behind Koors and held a knife across his throat while he extended his sword to the jailer's chest.

"I would prefer not to spill any blood here tonight," growled Lord Marak, "but that decision is yours."

Cortain Koors stiffened more at the sound of Marak's voice than he did to the knife at his throat. The big man pushed back his chair into Lord Marak and hollered as loud as he could. Lord Marak jumped backwards to avoid the bulk of Koors and the jailer went for his sword. Koors moved surprisingly quick for a man of his build as he flourished a knife of his own. Koors and the jailer converged on Lord Marak and the Lord of the Torak Clan did not hesitate. He swung his sinuous sword at Koors and was somewhat amazed as the sword cut cleanly through the overweight man. At the same time, Gunta sent an Omunga Star sailing into the forehead of the jailer.

Lord Marak began searching the cells for Cortain Rybak while Gunta fished through the jailer's keys. Lord Marak stopped when he found Cortain Rybak. The man was hanging from a wall with his legs and arms clasped in iron manacles. Lord Marak felt a lump rising in his throat as he observed the pitiful state his man was in. Rybak's body was naked and covered from head to toe with welts and bruises. His eyes were swollen shut and his head hung down on his chest. Gunta quickly opened the cell while Lord Marak stripped the uniform off the dead jailer. It would be large for Rybak, but at least it would offer some covering.

"Lord Marak," Gunta called softly, "I need help. I can't hold him and undo the manacles at the same time."

Lord Marak quickly finished getting the jailer's clothes and ran to help Gunta with Cortain Rybak. He threw the clothes down and supported Rybak while Gunta unlocked the manacles. Catching Rybak in his arms, Lord Marak laid him on a bench. The two warriors hurried to get some clothing on Rybak then Lord Marak lifted him and carried him to the stairs.

Halman was nervous when Lord Marak reached the top of the stairs. "Someone heard the shouting," he whispered. "I'm not sure who, but someone just ran past the door. I couldn't see where he went. It looks clear now, but we had better move quickly."

Lord Marak nodded and the three warriors streamed out of the doorway and headed for Lord Marshal Grefon's suite. As they slipped inside, they froze. The door to the sleeping chamber was open and someone was talking to Grefon. Lord Marak quickly carried Rybak into Grefon's study and laid him on the couch. Gunta and Halman followed and eased the door closed except for a small crack to look out.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 23

Going Home

"Take Rybak down to the river," whispered Lord Marak. "If I'm not there in three minutes, cut the ropes and get out of here."

"What are you planning?" retorted Gunta. "There is no reason for you to stay."

"There is one reason," insisted Lord Marak. "Lord Marshal Grefon has to know who freed Rybak. Get going now."

Gunta frowned, but he helped Halman get Cortain Rybak off the couch and to the window. Lord Marak kept watch at the door to Lord Marshal Grefon's sitting room as the other two warriors got Rybak situated so he could be lowered to the ground. Gunta climbed out the window as Lord Marak turned over his clothing bands to show silver once again. Lord Marshal Grefon emerged from his sleeping chambers with the Seneschal. The Seneschal left the suite and Grefon headed for the study.

"Get him out now!" Lord Marak softly exclaimed. "You have only seconds."

Lord Marak drew his sinuous sword and retreated to the dark corner as Halman let go of the window and dropped to the ground. The door opened and Lord Marshal Grefon entered carrying a candle.

"Too loud a noise has been known to be fatal," growled Lord Marak. "Close the door and put the candle on the desk."

Lord Marshal Grefon closed the door quietly and placed the candle on the desk before turning to face Lord Marak. "I guess I should have been expecting you," scowled Lord Marshal Grefon. "In any event, I'm glad you decided to stay rather than abort your mission. I have a room reserved for you."

"It wouldn't happen to be a room next to Cortain Rybak, would it?" asked Lord Marak. "Sit down. There are a few things I would like to make clear to you."

"You always were overconfident," sneered Lord Marshal Grefon as he sat on the couch. "You will have the rest of your life to talk with me. Why rush it?"

"I know you gave the Ragatha Clan permission to attack Fardale," spat Lord Marak. "That was a major mistake on your part. Now Fardale will never be yours."

"You are a fool, Marak," laughed Lord Marshal Grefon. "We will have Fardale back in a week. We promised them we would not to come to your aid in Fardale. We never promised to let the Ragatha scum keep it. We will kick them out of there quicker than they kicked you out and we will have their estates, as well."

"Lord Ridak will not be pleased with his Lord Marshal when he finds out how poorly your plans have worked," smiled Lord Marak. "Fardale is now the estate of the Torak Clan led by myself. I would suggest that Lord Ridak call upon the Lords Council if he wishes to try to get it back."

Lord Marshal Grefon finally seemed to notice the uniform Lord Marak was wearing and he stared at it as he answered. "You can't be serious. Whether we go to the Lords Council or just assemble our armies against you, you will lose, either way. What did you promise the Ragatha Clan to keep them from attacking you?"

"I should kill you for turning your dog, Koors, loose on Rybak," growled Lord Marak, "but I want you alive to suffer at Lord Ridak's hands for your bungling."

Lord Marak raised his sword and, as Lord Marshal Grefon cringed, hit him over the head with the hilt. He quickly sheathed his sword and lowered himself out the window. The estate grounds still appeared to be quiet and Lord Marak realized that the alarm was not sounded. The Seneschal must have heard Koors, but did not know where the sound had come from. He probably alerted Lord Marshal Grefon and left the decision about what to do up to him.

Lord Marak dashed across the open field and into the orchards. Looking around for the patrol, he dashed through the orchard to the path to the river. When he reached the river he ran along the bank until he came to the swimming area where the troops maintained a raft for recreation. He leaped onto the raft as Gunta swung his sword, cutting the ropes that held it in position. The momentum of Lord Marak's jump pushed the raft towards the center of the river where the current started it moving downstream.

"Cortain Rybak does not look good," remarked Halman. "He needs a healer badly."

The closest healer other than the one at Lituk Valley was in River's Bend or Forest Deep and Lord Marak could not go to either place. "He will need more than a healer if we don't get out of here quickly," sighed Lord Marak. "Do you think he can survive the ride back?"

"I don't know," admitted Halman. "I'm not a healer. I would feel better if he was treated before we returned."

Lord Marak gazed at the riverbank as they went floating by. He knew Rybak would be hurt, but he did not anticipate that Koors would be allowed near him. Rybak must have suffered greatly at the hands of his old Cortain.

"All right, Halman," decided Lord Marak. "When we get to the cave you will see that Rybak is comfortable. Gunta, you will leave for Fardale. Lord Marshal Yenga will be heading this way with his Army. Tell him to turn back to Fardale. Tell him that we were not captured. I will try to find a healer somewhere and bring him back to the cave. They will notice the raft missing in the morning and may search along the river for a while, so keep inside the cave at all times."

"Lord Marshal Yenga will not be happy that we are not with you," frowned Gunta.

"Lord Marshal Yenga is not making the decisions here," reminded Lord Marak. "He will follow my orders, just as you will."

Gunta saw the area where the cave was and used a plank to steer the raft closer to shore. As the raft bumped the shoreline, Lord Marak jumped off and grabbed the short rope, holding the raft while the others got off. Gunta helped Halman get Rybak into the cave and Lord Marak shoved the raft back into the river. Gunta emerged from the cave with two horses and handed one to Lord Marak.

"Where will you find a healer?" asked Gunta.

"There is only one place that I can think of," stated Lord Marak. "There are some Chula near Forest Deep. I will ask them for help."

"But they are not Kywara," warned Gunta. "They do not know of Lord Marak of Fardale. They will see you as another flatlander invading their homeland."

"You may be right, Gunta," agreed Lord Marak, "but it is the only chance that Rybak has and I owe him whatever help I can find. Do not try to search for me among the Chula. If I do not return, Halman will do what he can for Rybak. You stay with Lord Marshal Yenga. Remember to stay off the normal trail to Fardale. The Situ will be heading that way looking for us."

Gunta nodded and rode off into the darkness. Lord Marak went into the cave and checked on Rybak before melding into the still night.

* * * *

Lord Marshal Grefon felt the lump on his head and cursed. He sat up on the couch and shook his head to clear it. Remembering what had happened, he grabbed the sword he had come into the study to get and ran towards the dungeon stairs. He threw open the door and ran down the stairs and stopped when he saw the carnage which used to be Cortain Koors. He ran back up the stairs shouting so loudly that he was heard outside. One of the soldiers from the patrol met him as he opened the front door of the mansion.

"Rybak has escaped," he ordered. "Marak is with him. Rouse the troops and get a Corte out on the road to Fardale immediately. I want them both and I want them alive. Marak, at least. I don't care if Rybak is dead or alive."

The soldier turned and ran towards the barracks as Lord Ridak appeared at the front door of the mansion. "What is going on?" he demanded. "What was that about Rybak and Marak?"

Lord Marshal Grefon turned and stared at the Lord of the Situ. "Marak came to rescue Rybak," explained Lord Marshal Grefon. "Let us go into my study and I will explain it to you."

Lord Ridak followed his Lord Marshal and sat on the couch in Grefon's study. The Lord Marshal looked at the still burning candle and tried to estimate how much time had expired since he had seen Marak.

"The Seneschal woke me with a report of a shout," began Lord Marshal Grefon. "I came to my study to get my sword and was surprised by Marak. He must have been hiding in there waiting for me."

"So, he managed to survive the attack of the Ragatha Clan," surmised Lord Ridak. "Small matter. He can never get it back again."

"That is not the picture he paints," corrected Lord Marshal Grefon. "He told me that Fardale is no longer a Situ estate. He now calls himself Lord Marak of the Torak Clan and is claiming Fardale for himself."

"Impossible," cried Lord Ridak. "He is just an impudent fool. There is no way he could hope to hold off the Ragatha Clan. He is probably lucky to have escaped with his life."

"Perhaps you are right," mused Lord Marshal Grefon, "but I have never known Marak to lie. There is a chance he managed to talk the Ragatha Clan into not attacking. Maybe he offered them part of Fardale to leave him alone. Maybe he convinced them that they would be better off with him as a neighbor than the Situ Clan."

"It could be worse than that," postulated Lord Ridak. "He may have offered to become an estate of the Ragatha in order to remain Lord of Fardale. That is something Lord Sevrin might buy. He gains Fardale without a fight and Marak keeps his position."

"Possibly," admitted Lord Marshal Grefon. "He made some comment about you calling on the Lords Council to get Fardale back from him."

"Perhaps after his dealings with the Sorgans," Lord Ridak observed, "our Marak thinks the Lords Council is easy to fool. He could not be more mistaken. If he still controls Fardale and has tried to put up a banner other than the Situ banner, he has just offered to give Fardale back to us. It will actually be easier than sending our troops. I want a messenger sent to the capital immediately. We will take Marak's advice and ask for a mediator from the Lords Council."

"You should let me send scouts first to make sure that what Marak has said is true," protested Lord Marshal Grefon.

"Every time I have taken your advice regarding Marak," sneered Lord Ridak, "things have gotten worse. I sometimes think I would have been better off sending you to Fardale and making Marak my Lord Marshal. Why didn't you kill him while he was here?"

Lord Marshal Grefon broke eye contact with Lord Ridak and stared at his bookshelf. "He attacked me when I wasn't looking," fabricated Lord Marshal Grefon. "I told you I was coming in here to get my sword and he was already here waiting for me. He hit me over the head with something."

"I see," ridiculed Lord Ridak. "He surprised you and knocked you out and then he had a talk with you? After your little chat he went downstairs and freed Rybak. How did he manage to get past the jailer?"

Lord Marshal Grefon burned with shame and hatred for Marak. "He killed both the jailer and Koors," he spat. "Koors was cut in two. I'm not sure how the jailer died, but Marak stripped his uniform off, probably to cover Rybak."

"Let me see if I have this right," scowled Lord Ridak. "One lone man waltzes onto my estate and gains entry to the Lord Marshal's study. He knocks the Lord Marshal unconscious and then goes downstairs and kills two men. He takes a nearly dead captive, dresses him and walks off into the night and we can't find him. Is that the story I am to believe?"

Lord Marshal Grefon rose and walked to the door. "I will summon a messenger for you, Lord Ridak."

"Not quite so fast, Lord Marshal," called Lord Ridak. "I want every man who was on duty last night

punished. I will not have an estate that is open for any person off the road to enter whenever he sees fit. The punishment should be harsh. As for yourself, you will no longer issue orders on this estate without my approval. You have bungled our dealings with Marak at every turn. I can not afford any more of your wondrous plans. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, My Lord," saluted Lord Marshal Grefon. He waited to see if the tirade would continue and when Lord Ridak rose and stormed out, Grefon put his fist through the wall. Oh, how he wished it was Lord Ridak's suite that Marak had entered. Nothing would give Grefon more pleasure right now than to cut off Marak's head right after the young Lord got done with humiliating Lord Ridak.

* * * *

Cortain Rybak woke up and winced as he tried to move. Halman rushed over and forced the wounded man to lie back down. "Halman?" Rybak wheezed. "Where am I?"

"You are safe, Cortain," soothed Halman. "You are in a cave north of Lituk Valley. Lord Marak has gone for a healer. You must rest until he returns."

"Lord Marak was here?" coughed Cortain Rybak. "Tell me what happened."

"If you promise not to try to get up," admonished Halman. "Lord Marak, Gunta and myself broke into the mansion and pulled you out. There is not much to tell except you will be glad to know that Koors will not bother you ever again. Lord Marak cut him in two. Gunta has gone to stop Lord Marshal Yenga from attacking Lituk Valley. He was going to do so if we did not return by a certain time."

"Lord Marshal Yenga?" quizzed Cortain Rybak. "What happened with the Ragatha attack?"

It suddenly dawned on Halman that Rybak knew nothing of the events of the last few days. "We defeated the Ragatha Clan," smiled Halman. "They have sworn allegiance to Lord Marak and given up Woodville. Lord Marak has declared his independence from the Situ Clan. We are now members of the Torak Clan. How do you like our new uniforms? Black and silver."

"It is a fine uniform," coughed Cortain Rybak. "Why did Lord Marak come for me? He is not the debtor in our relationship. I already owe him more than I can repay. Why would he risk his life for me?"

"Because he cares for his people," smiled Halman. "Because he cares for you. Be true to him, Cortain, and he will never desert you. He does not seek repayment from you. He only asks for your loyalty and you have shown him yours."

Cortain Rybak turned away from Halman and cried.

* * * *

Lord Marak rode hard into the night. He had escorted a caravan to Forest Deep once and remembered the terrain fairly well, but he had never ventured near the Chula there. He wondered whether the Chula would even give him a chance to talk or would they just strike him down when he entered their territory? He berated himself for his negative thoughts and cast them aside. Dwelling on death often stopped one from acting when action was necessary. If death came, it would come without being asked for.

Lord Marak was not entirely sure where he was going. The only reference he had was a conversation several years ago. One of the Forest Deep soldiers was telling tales about the Chula and had gestured towards the North when he spoke. Lord Marak veered off the road to Forest Deep and headed for the forest where the Situ did not venture. He did not know where to look for the Chula, but he knew they

would notice him if he made enough noise.

Lord Marak slowed when he entered the dense forest. There were no real paths here, only game trails. The trees were old and mature and the forest was very black. He had to slow to a walk and the horse had trouble finding a way deeper into the woods. Lord Marak heard a rustle off to his left and felt his muscles involuntarily tense. He had the strange sensation of someone watching him, so he stopped dead still.

"I am Marak, Lord of the Torak, friend of the Kywara," he called loudly. "I seek a healer and come in peace. Please hear my plea."

"Since when is a flatlander a friend of the Chula?" asked a voice behind him.

Lord Marak nearly jumped off his horse with the sound a voice so close to him. He held his nervousness in check as he slowly swiveled in his saddle and saw a Chula warrior standing behind him.

"Since I have given my word and honor to the Kywara," answered Lord Marak. "I beg forgiveness for my trespass, but I have great need of a healer. I have a friend who is near death."

"Why do you come to the Zatong instead of your flatlander brothers?" asked the barbarian. "Forest Deep has a healer to tend to your friend."

"The Situ are my enemies," declared Lord Marak. "Their medicine would mean death for my friend and myself."

"You fear the Situ more than the Zatong?" chuckled the naked warrior.

"I neither fear nor respect the Situ," corrected Lord Marak. "I respect the Chula and do not wish to fear them. Have you a healer who can help?"

"Remove yourself from your horse," ordered the barbarian. "You will follow me. Do not touch your weapons and do not stray from the path or you will die. You will be watched by many."

Lord Marak nodded and followed the Zatong warrior through the woods. He felt as if the path they took was intentionally confusing and many times he felt like he was heading back the way they had come, but he kept his observations to himself. Half an hour later, he was lead into a Chula village similar to the Kywara village near Fardale, but much larger. The people of the village looked just like the Kywara and their movements appeared to be the same. Even the placement of the Leader's hut was similar.

A tall, dark, muscular Chula waited in front of the Leader's hut. Lord Marak's horse was taken from him and he walked towards the Leader.

"Thank you for allowing me to speak," greeted Lord Marak.

"Turn around," ordered the Leader.

Lord Marak turned his back on the Zatong Leader and felt his sword being taken.

"You may face me now," stated the Leader. "This is the Sword of Torak. Where have you gotten this?"

"It was a gift from Tmundo, Leader of the Kywara," answered Lord Marak as he turned to see the

Leader holding his sword.

"The Sword of Torak is not a gift," declared the Zatong Leader. "It is a pronouncement. You have said that you are the Lord of the Torak. Explain what you mean."

"I rule in Fardale," began Lord Marak. "It has long been a Situ estate, but I have declared myself free of them. I have called my people the Clan of Torak after my mother's wishes. Tmundo has given me this sword and called it the Sword of Torak. I thought he was referring to my Clan name. You indicate something different. What does it mean to you?"

Another Zatong joined the Leader and stood next to him. The second barbarian could have been a twin of the Leader except for his whiskers and lion's mane. He certainly was as muscular as the Leader. Lord Marak knew he was the Head Shaman of the Zatong Tribe, but he was as muscular as a warrior.

"Brother," interrupted the Shaman, "you forget your manners. Lord Marak, I am Ukaro, Head Shaman of the Zatong. My brother, Kyata, is the Tribe Leader. Come and sit by the fire so we may discuss many things."

"Ukaro is right," conceded Kyata. "I forget my manners. We are not used to flatlanders coming to talk with us."

"I would like to spend time getting to know the Zatong," smiled Lord Marak, "but my time is short and my plea is urgent. My friend is close to death and I fear every minute is important."

"What is wrong with your friend?" asked Ukaro.

"He has been tortured by the Situ," replied Lord Marak. "I stole him from their dungeon at Lituk Valley this evening and left him in a cave with one of my men. He is not well enough to travel."

"Where is the cave?" queried Kyata.

"It is near the river north of Lituk Valley," answered Lord Marak. "Less than an hour's ride from Lituk Valley. I can show your healer the way."

"I know the place," offered Kyata. "I will send the healer, but you will stay until he returns."

Lord Marak nodded and removed his waistband and handed it to Kyata. "This will inform my man that I have sent the healer," explained Lord Marak. "He will not attack a Chula, but he may be nervous because the Situ are hunting for us."

"You think wisely for a flatlander," complimented Ukaro.

Kyata took the waistband and called for the healer. He instructed the healer regarding the location of Rybak and gave him the waistband. Kyata returned and gave the Sword of Torak back to Lord Marak.

"I am surprised that Tmundo has given you the Sword of Torak and not explained what it is," continued Kyata.

"He gave me the sword two nights ago in Fardale," replied Lord Marak. "He said we would talk more about it when I next visited him in his village."

"You visit with the Kywara?" questioned Ukaro. "Why?"

"I find the ways of the Kywara enlightening and value Tmundo's advice," answered Lord Marak. "We have both worked with our people to better relations between the Chula and the flatlanders. Is that not the way neighbors should treat each other?"

"It is," laughed Kyata, "but I never thought I would hear such words from a flatlander. You are a strange flatlander, Lord Marak of the Torak."

Women brought bowls of food and set them down in front of the three men. They also brought bowls of water and towels and set them down next to each man. Lord Marak had visited the Kywara village enough to know the purpose of the towels and bowls of water. He stripped off his shirt and washed his upper body with a moist towel while the Zalong men did the same. Lord Marak got the sensation of being watched again and looked up to see his two hosts staring at him.

"Who are you, Lord Marak?" demanded Ukaro.

"What do you mean?" questioned Lord Marak. "I have told you who I am. I do not understand the question."

"I did not ask what you are," persisted the Shaman. "I asked who you are. You have told us that you are Lord of Fardale and a friend to the Kywara, but you have not told us where you came from or who you are."

Lord Marak detected a sudden hostility from the two Zalong men and began to worry for his safety. "I am Marak, son a slave woman. I grew up in Lituk Valley and joined the Army. I was made Lord of Fardale in order to avoid some embarrassment to the Situ Clan. They expected me to fail, but I have succeeded. There is nothing more to tell."

"You do not mention your father," Kyata pointed out.

"I have never known my father," admitted Lord Marak. "My mother became a slave to protect him when I was young. I have no memories of him."

"That is sad and not the way life should be," softened Kyata. "Is your mother still a slave?"

"No," replied Lord Marak. "I purchased her and freed her. She lives in my mansion in Fardale. I do not believe in enslaving people."

Ukaro suddenly stabbed his knife into the ground and stormed off. Kyata rose and stared after him. "It is late," Kyata declared as he signaled for a Zalong warrior. "My warrior will show you where to sleep tonight. We will talk more tomorrow. You will not leave this village until you are allowed to. Sleep well, flatlander."

Lord Marak was confused by the changing emotions of his Zalong hosts, but he had little choice in the matter. He had come here to seek out their help and he would have to play by their rules until Rybak was safe. He was shown to a hut and settled down with the knowledge that there were Zalong guards posted outside to keep him from leaving.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 24

Lost Ties

Lord Marak slept well despite the feeling that he was a prisoner. He rose early and stumbled out of the tent to find the village already busy. The guard at his hut did not acknowledge his leaving nor did he try to stop him. Lord Marak wandered over to the Leader's tent and found Kyata outside with the Shaman, Ukaro.

"I hope the morning breaks well with the Lord of the Torak," greeted Kyata.

"Good morning," mumbled Lord Marak. "Yes, I slept well."

"I think our young warrior is a creature of the night, not the morning," smiled Ukaro. "Come, join us for the morning meal."

Lord Marak sat down and was served a plate of very large eggs and a pair of tiny legs, probably squirrel. The aroma was tantalizing and Lord Marak dug into his food with a hunger that had not been fed enough during the last two days. Again, he had the sensation of being watched but this time he didn't even bother to look and find his hosts staring at him.

"I have sent a messenger to the Kywara," offered Kyata. "He will inform Tmundo that you are here with us. Your people might become worried."

"That was very thoughtful of you," Lord Marak responded as he wondered what questions the messenger was sent to ask Tmundo.

"It was the least we could do for a friend of the Chula," smiled Kyata. "What are your plans for the future? Will you battle with the Situ?"

"That will depend on Lord Ridak," answered Lord Marak warily. "I prefer to solve my differences verbally, but I am prepared to battle if necessary."

"Do you use magic in your battles?" queried Ukaro.

Lord Marak nearly choked on the tiny leg. "Magic?" he echoed. "What type of magic do you mean?"

"The only type of magic you flatlanders know," chuckled Ukaro. "Certainly, I was not referring to Chula magic. You said your mother was a mage. I just wondered if you used any of that type of magic in your battles."

Lord Marak put his food down and stared at the Shaman. "I do not wish to be rude," Lord Marak stiffened, "but what type of game are we playing here?"

"I do not understand your hostility," shrugged Ukaro. "I am trying to make polite conversation. Is not this the way of flatlanders? Or do you still consider us potential enemies?"

"I am not referring to your interrogation of my battle tactics," snapped Lord Marak. "I said my mother was a slave. I never said she was a mage. I ask, again, what type of game are we playing?"

"Forgive my brother's poor manners," consoled Kyata. "We wish to know more about you and your family than you have offered us. Torak holds very special significance for the Chula. Ukaro sometimes thinks he is clever and is able to gain information from people with his cleverness. There was no harm intended. Tell us about your mother."

"I am sorry," apologized Lord Marak. "You have extended me help when I needed it badly and I have responded poorly to your curiosity. My mother is a Soil Mage. We moved to Lituk Valley when I was six years old. Lord Ridak made my mother a slave and forced her into the fields. When I came of age, I joined the Army. I was not permitted to talk with her again. I think she handled her situation better than I did. I almost became a slave myself because I broke the rules and talked to her one night." Marak subconsciously reached into his shirt and felt his necklace as he remembered that evening. It was the only time she had ever hit him.

"She loved my father dearly," Lord Marak continued. "For a while I hated my father because he never came to rescue my mother, but that night she explained to me that he thought she was dead. I made her a promise that night to get her out of Lituk Valley."

"A promise you obviously kept," praised Kyata. "Did she give you the necklace we saw last night?"

Lord Marak realized then that it was when he removed his shirt that the Zatonk's moods had changed. Rykoma Kywara had also expressed an interest in his necklace. "Yes," answered Lord Marak. "She said it was all she had left of my father and that I should wear it always. I know this necklace means something to the Chula. Rykoma Kywara also expressed an interest in it. Why?"

"In a moment," Kyata answered. "What..."

"Her name?" interrupted Ukaro. "What is your mother's name?"

Lord Marak looked from the Leader to the Shaman. "Glenda," Lord Marak replied. "Her name is Glenda. Why are you so interested...?"

Lord Marak stopped when his eyes landed on Ukaro. The Shaman had tears running freely down his cheeks. His jaw was rigid and his teeth were clenched. His hands, which had nails that were sharp like claws, were raking his forearms and leaving bloody trails. Kyata stood and placed his hand gently on Ukaro's shoulder. He gave a sad look to Lord Marak and turned to leave. Lord Marak started to rise also, to leave the Shaman to deal with whatever was bothering him, but Kyata shook his head and Lord Marak sat back down.

"Perhaps you have some healing powers of your own, Lord Marak," Kyata said gently. "Stay and keep Ukaro company, nephew."

Lord Marak looked after Kyata as he left and then the words struck him like a hammer blow between the shoulders. He looked at his necklace and, for the first time, saw the same necklace around Ukaro's neck. It finally dawned on Lord Marak why his father had only come to Forest Deep to see his family occasionally. Few of the flatlanders would have accepted a woman with a Chula husband. The Chula might not have accepted a Shaman with a flatlander wife, either. Marak thought his punishment in life had been bad and his mother's unbearable, but what Ukaro must have felt for the last fourteen years could only be described as torturous.

He looked across the fire at the father he had never known and did not know how to react. Finally, he stood up and walked around the fire and sat next to his father and put his arm around him. Lord Marak

could not think of any words to console the grief of a lifetime. The Shaman, Ukaro, looked up at the son whose growing up he had sorely missed and hugged him. For a long time father and son sat soundlessly with their arms wrapped around each other. Marak thought back to the night his mother had slapped him and mentally kicked himself for his arrogance and stupidity. He had presumed that his father did not care enough to rescue him and his mother. Now he knew that his father would have done anything, killed anyone, to get his family back. That was why Glenda had someone tell Ukaro that she was dead. It was the only way she could think of to save him from destroying himself.

Ukaro finally broke the embrace and held Marak at arms length. "Has she remarried?" he asked.

"No," smiled Marak. "She has no interest in other men. You are still her love. She speaks of you every time we talk, but she never told me who you are. I think she fears that you are dead and is afraid to be told so. You must come to Fardale."

Ukaro shook his head sadly. "Look at me, Son," the Shaman said. "Are your people so enlightened that they will accept someone who looks like me?"

"Do my ears deceive me?" scolded Marak. "Is the Head Shaman of the Zatong afraid of what flatlanders think? I rule Fardale and the people will accept what I accept ... and I accept you as you are. Do not throw another day away, Father. You have been separated from Mother for too long. Or do you have someone else?"

"Someone else?" blustered Ukaro. "You impudent, young flatlander. Didn't your mother give you any sense at all? There is no one like Glenda."

"Then it is settled," laughed Marak. "You will return to Fardale with me."

"I shall," promised Ukaro, "but I would like to go by way of Lituk Valley."

"No, Father!" exclaimed Marak. "Lord Ridak is not worth the effort. I will deal with him in my own way."

"Not worth the effort?" queried Ukaro. "The man has stolen fourteen years of my life. He has enslaved my wife and made my son a stranger. Not worth the effort? You have some things to learn about the way of the Chula, Son. Lord Ridak will wish for death for a long time, but it will elude him. I promise you that."

"I will not accept that promise, Father," Marak declared stubbornly. "Your time is better spent with those who have missed you for fourteen years, not the man who stole them. Let us not argue over Lord Ridak. I think he will be coming to Fardale soon, anyway. If you are there, we will both have an opportunity to deal with him."

"Very well," agreed Ukaro. "We will discuss this further after we have rejoined your mother. Let me inform Kyata that I will be leaving, then we will spend the day together until your friend arrives. I think he will be a guest of the Zatong for a while if he is hurt as badly as you described."

"Will that be a problem?" asked Marak.

"No," smiled Ukaro. "Nothing is a problem for the son of the Head Shaman and the nephew of the Leader."

* * * *

"It looks like an entire Corte," whispered the bandit leader. "I wonder if this speaks ill of Lord Marak?"

"I don't think so," replied the other bandit. "If it was an attack, they would send more than a Corte. I think they are looking for Lord Marak and that means he has eluded them."

"I hope you are right," stated the bandit leader. "Still, you will ride to Fardale and alert Lord Marshal Yenga. I do not know how far they will go and if they reach Fardale, we should have someone waiting for them."

The other bandit saluted and ran for his horse. The bandit leader looked off in the distance at the approaching army and hoped his companion was right. He would not feel good about the situation until he saw Lord Marak return.

* * * *

Tmundo, Leader of the Kywara, gazed at the woman brought before him. "Why are you here, flatlander?" Tmundo asked. "Lord Marak has promised that our lands would not be trespassed upon."

The woman met the gaze of the Chula Leader and returned it, measure for measure. "I have come to talk with the mighty Leader of the Kywara," the woman stated defiantly. "Is your time so valuable that you can not spare any for me?"

"Such impertinence for a woman," smiled Tmundo. "Why do I get the feeling that your words can cut as deeply as my sword? I will spare you time to ask your questions, but you must deliver my disappointment to Lord Marak for the behavior of his people."

"I am as much your people as his," rebuffed the woman. "You have no claim over this land which I can not match."

"Who is this woman whose tongue lashes stronger than a viper's?" chuckled Rykoma.

"I am Glenda Torak," the woman declared proudly, "mother of Marak Torak and wife of Ukaro Zatong."

"I knew I had seen that necklace before," beamed Rykoma.

"This explains much about Lord Marak," agreed Tmundo. "I knew he was too good to be a flatlander and your vision of him as the Torak confused me. I could not understand how a flatlander could fulfill our prophecy. Now it all makes sense. What can I do for you, mother of Marak, wife of Ukaro?"

"You can tell me if Ukaro still lives," Glenda asked.

"As of a year ago, he did," Rykoma answered. "Since then, I do not know."

Glenda's eyes dampened as she sat down next to the fire pit. She finally got up the nerve to ask the question that had been eating at her for years and now she didn't know what to do with the answer. "Is he ... has he taken another wife?"

"That is a question I can definitely answer," smiled Rykoma. "Ukaro chose his mate for life. Not your life, Glenda, ... his life. Ukaro would not remarry though he could have his choice of women. He is the Head Shaman of the Zatong."

"Head Shaman?" mused Glenda with a twinkle in her moist eyes. "I always knew he had talent."

Tmundo signaled and a woman brought a bowl of water and mug of Kywara wine and handed it to Glenda. Glenda savored the aroma of blackberries as she sipped the wine and remembered the first mug of blackberry wine she had shared with Ukaru.

"Would you like me to send a message to him?" offered Rykoma. "He will be delighted to hear you are alive."

"I don't know," confessed Glenda. "I had convinced myself he was dead or remarried. It was the only way I could bear my slavery. Now that I know, I feel wonderful for him, but I am not sure that I want him to know about me."

"Why not?" asked Tmundo. "What reason could you possibly have for hiding from him?"

"I was a young woman when I sent the message to Ukaru that I was dead," replied Glenda. "I am no longer the same woman. Ukaru would feel obligated to me and that is not fair to him. I just had to know about him. You understand?"

"No," answered Rykoma, "but I have never understood women."

Tmundo was silent. He understood only too well. He knew what the flatlander Lords did to their slave women. They broke their bodies as well as their spirit. They robbed them of their pride and their security and filled them with hopelessness. He also knew what Ukaru's obligation would be when he learned what had really happened to his wife. Tmundo knew that Glenda also realized what her discovery would mean. By letting her husband find out she is still alive, she might be sending him to his death.

"We will honor your decision whatever it is," stated Tmundo. "We can have a messenger to the Zalong in less than a day. Tell us what you wish and we shall do whatever we can to satisfy it."

"I don't know what I want," cried Glenda. "I mean, I know what I want, but I don't think I can have it. What can you tell me of Ukaru? What is he like now?"

"He is the same Ukaru I knew many years ago," stated Rykoma, "although since you died ... since you were taken, he has become very bitter and intolerant of flatlanders. He is still stronger than a wasooki and twice as stubborn."

"He was always stubborn," laughed Glenda. "He was always strong, too. I would love to see him. I have heard that the Chula mages can make people invisible. Is it possible to do that to me so that I could see him without revealing myself?"

"No," answered Rykoma. "We can not make people invisible. What the stories refer to is a state that a Shaman passes through during transformation. During a body transformation, the Shaman ceases to be visible for a short period. The period can be willfully extended for up to ten minutes by one who is skilled and powerful, but no Shaman has the ability to do that to someone else."

"Thank you, Tmundo, Rykoma," sighed Glenda. "I have taken too much of your time already. You have answered my questions."

Tmundo reached out and gently took Glenda's arm. "Stay with us for a while," he proposed. "My heart

breaks with the sadness in your eyes. Give us time to talk about this problem. Maybe a solution can be found which can help heal your wounds."

"I did not tell anyone I was coming here," advised Glenda. "They might get worried."

"No one will miss you for a short while," offered Rykoma.

A Chula messenger arrived in the village and came directly towards Tmundo. "Greetings, Kywara Leader," stated the messenger.

"Greetings to you, Zatonng," returned Tmundo. "How fares your Head Shaman?"

The messenger blinked at the departure from the ritual greeting, but quickly regained his composure. "Shaman Ukaro is well, Leader Tmundo," answered the messenger. "He sends news that Lord Marak is with the Zatonng. He wishes you to inform the flatlanders so they do not worry needlessly."

"Shaman Ukaro is a wise Shaman," smiled Tmundo. "Rest and be cared for, Zatonng. See me before you leave. I may have a return message."

The messenger nodded and trotted off. Tmundo looked at Glenda and smiled. "Your husband is alive and well, Glenda."

"What is Marak doing there?" worried Glenda. "I heard that he had left the estate, but I did not think he would even know how to find Ukaro."

"I wonder if they know about each other?" posed Rykoma. "That would certainly make your decision for you, Glenda."

Tmundo shot a look at Rykoma which caused the Shaman to silence his mouth. "It is something to consider," Tmundo sighed. "Both of them are intelligent and if Lord Marak still wears the necklace, Ukaro will notice it."

"Great," cried Glenda. "Then both of them can run off to Lituk Valley and get killed."

The messenger was back already and overheard the last statement. "Lord Marak has already been to Lituk Valley," he declared. "He came to the Zatonng for a healer for one of his men. One called Rybak."

"Men!" cried Glenda. "You are all crazy! Must a man have a death wish to be a man?"

Rykoma shook his head, but Tmundo touched the arm of the messenger. "You have not rested long enough, Zatonng. I ask you to refresh yourself longer."

The messenger dutifully nodded and trotted off again. "Glenda, I would like to send a message back to Ukaro," stated Tmundo. "I want to tell Ukaro that he is needed here immediately. I will ask him to come here without detour. Once he is here, I will help you to convince him not to go to Lituk Valley. It saddens my heart to see so much woe between people who belong together. If you do not let him know about you, he may still seek his vengeance. The best way to avoid that is for you to reunite with him."

"Why would he even want me back?" sobbed Glenda. "I am not the innocent woman he married. Seeing me will only drive him mad."

"I disagree," interrupted Rykoma after finally figuring out what Glenda's hesitation was all about. "You are a fool if you think anything would change Ukaro's love for you. The last time I met him, you had been dead for thirteen years. He still would not even think of another woman. Can you honestly believe that the actions of another man would affect his love for you? I have admitted that I don't understand women, but you, Glenda, do not understand men. The only problem you will have with Ukaro is keeping him away from you."

"And what about your son?" asked Tmundo. "Does he not have the right to finally find his father? Can you deny Marak that pleasure when the path he takes brings him closer to death every day?"

Glenda stopped sobbing and looked up at the mention of Marak. "I told Marak to name his clan Torak," she admitted. "Ukaro often spoke of the prophecy and wished his son would be the one. What will he think when I tell him of that?"

"He will rejoice," smiled Tmundo. "I wondered where Marak got the name. It makes sense now. What you are unaware of is that he is the Torak. Rykoma had the vision. Your son ... Ukaro's son is the Torak. I have already presented the Sword of Torak to him not two nights ago."

"You are serious?" questioned Glenda. "He is really the Torak?"

"Yes, Glenda," declared Rykoma. "My vision was indisputable. You can not expect to hide the Torak from a Zatong Shaman. Ukaro will know soon if he does not already. Let Tmundo call for him to come here without delay. Do not live in confusion any longer. Know the truth and accept it, whatever it is."

Glenda's resolve strengthened and she nodded her head. "Send the message, Tmundo," she decided. "I shall wait with you for his arrival."

* * * *

Lord Marshal Yenga turned from the bandit and called Lectain Zorkil. "I want four Cortes ready to ride in five minutes," ordered the Lord Marshal. "I want one from each Clan. We have a Corte of Situ heading this way. I suspect they are looking for Lord Marak. I want them captured or killed, preferably captured. Do not let a single one of them escape."

"Why one from each Clan?" asked Lectain Zorkil.

"Confusion, Lectain," smiled Lord Marshal Yenga. "If they fear attack from one Clan, they may seek solace with another. It will help control the situation quicker."

Lectain Zorkil saluted and turned to assemble the men. Within a few minutes he had the men mounted and heading east. He immediately issued orders for the four Cortes to split up and explained the goal of the mission. Each of the Cortains nodded his understanding and the Cortes grew distant from one another.

Lectain Zorkil stayed with the Fardale Corte who were outfitted in their new black and silver uniforms and commanded by Cortain Tagoro. Tagoro's Corte had already served terms as bandits and knew the countryside well. He chose a spot, which afforded a long view of the trail into Fardale. It was high ground and Lectain Zorkil could clearly see the placement of the other three Cortes although they would not be visible to someone on the trail. They did not have long to wait as the green and yellow Situ Corte came cautiously into view. The Situ were not in a hurry and the men appeared to be leery of their close proximity to Fardale.

Lectain Zorkil waited until the Situ column had passed and then waved a black and silver flag in the air. Cortain Tagoro already had his Corte heading down the slope to seal off the rear of the Situ column. Lectain Zorkil waited until he saw the other three Cortes moving before he stood high in his saddle and shouted. His voice echoed and reverberated off the hills and he smiled when he saw the Situ Corte halt and stare up into the hills. Lectain Zorkil continued shouting and waving his Torak flag until they spotted him. His purpose was to halt the column while his men got into position and he smiled as he saw them do just that.

Confusion reigned in the Situ column when one of the riders pointed to the Ragatha Corte ahead of them blocking the trail. The Situ Cortain was torn between attacking the Ragatha Corte and retreating when another shout broke out from the North. The Situ turned and were puzzled to see a Corte of Sorgan troops off to their right. Lectain Zorkil turned his horse and headed down the slope towards the Situ Cortain as he heard a shout from the Litari. He could almost picture the Situ column looking off to their left at the Litari Clansmen.

Just before he entered the trail, Lectain Zorkil heard the shout from Cortain Tagoro and knew that the Situ were surrounded. Lectain Zorkil stared at the Situ Cortain as he rode slowly and purposely towards him. The Situ Cortain rode towards Zorkil and they met at the side of the trail.

"What is going on here, Lectain?" asked the Situ Cortain. "What Clan are your colors? They are not familiar to me."

"They will be, Cortain," Lectain Zorkil prophesized. "They are the colors of the Torak Clan. The Clan of Lord Marak."

"Lord Marak?" questioned the Situ Cortain. "He is a Situ and he is wanted."

"You are mistaken on one point, Cortain," smiled Lectain Zorkil. "He is no longer a Situ, but he is wanted. He is wanted by each of the four Cortes surrounding you. All four of these Clans owe allegiance to Lord Marak. Instruct your men to abandon their weapons and they will get to live and swear allegiance to Lord Marak. Refuse and they will die, to the man."

"All four Clans owe allegiance to Lord Marak?" questioned the Cortain. "How is that possible?"

"With Lord Marak, everything is possible," laughed Lectain Zorkil. "Make your choice, Cortain. I have been instructed to accept your surrender if you offer it, but I am only going to listen up 'til the time the first weapon is drawn. The choice is your to make ... now."

The Cortain turned and surveyed the four Cortes surrounding him. Knowing that not one of his men would survive, the Cortain ordered his men to abandon their weapons.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 25

Confrontation

Tmundo, Leader of the Kywara, gestured and Lord Marak sat by the fire. "Greetings, Leader of the Kywara," opened Lord Marak. "Greetings, Head Shaman of the Kywara."

"Welcome to our home, Lord Marak," offered Tmundo.

"Greetings, Lord of the Torak," smiled Rykoma. "What brings the Torak to our home?"

"Just the desire to visit and seek counsel," answered Lord Marak. "How are the love birds getting along?"

"If they had not been already married and the parents of a mighty warlord," chuckled Rykoma, "I would predict a union any day now."

"Everything is as it should be," smiled Tmundo. "They are inseparable. Like a pair of young cubs, they shudder at the thought of being apart for longer than a song. What counsel does the Lord of the Torak seek?"

Lord Marak picked up a stick and drew diagrams in the dirt. The diagrams were meaningless, but Marak felt better doing something with his hands. "I question the right way of the Chula," started Lord Marak. "I have received a message from the Lords Council. An emissary of the Lords Council will arrive in Lituk Valley in two days. A Squad of Imperial troops have been sent to escort me to Lituk Valley for a mediation on the ownership of Fardale."

"You have been expecting this," noted Tmundo. "Are you not ready to deal with Lord Ridak?"

"I am prepared," nodded Lord Marak. "I feel that I already know the outcome of the mediation. That is not the problem. The problem lies in the aftermath of negotiations."

"You suspect that Lord Ridak or yourself will not be happy with the outcome of the mediation," suggested Tmundo, "and a conflict of might will follow the decision of the Lords Council? Is that what troubles you?"

"No," responded Lord Marak. "The conflict is inevitable. What concerns me is Ukaro. He feels this need to bring vengeance on Lord Ridak. Is this necessary according to your law? What happens if he does not kill Lord Ridak?"

"Ah," sighed Rykoma, "I see your problem clearly. You also have a grievance against Lord Ridak. How is it possible for two men to kill the same man?"

"That is not Lord Marak's problem," interrupted Tmundo. "I am not sure how to answer your question, Lord Marak. There are no laws among the Chula regarding a man's need for revenge. There are only customs and feelings. You seek to protect your father from harm, but he is the Head Shaman of the Zatong. He is a man who can take care of himself. You are a son who has no need of worry."

"I'm not sure that is an acceptable answer," countered Lord Marak. "I have seen my mother without Ukaro for many years. I do not wish to ever see her that way again. Will I offend Ukaro or the Chula if I do not inform him of the upcoming conflict?"

Tmundo picked up a stick and started poking the coals of the fire. Rykoma glanced at Tmundo and then moved his eyes to meet Lord Marak's. "Ukaro is a proud man," the Head Shaman of the Kywara announced. "He feels that Lord Ridak's death will fall far short of restitution, but he will seek it as the only recourse he has. If you deprive him of that opportunity, purposely, it will hurt him deeply. He will see himself as a man whose son does not respect him and that will hurt him greater than the continued good health of Lord Ridak."

"You are not aware of the power of a Chula Shaman," interjected Tmundo. "Ukaro could cause more damage to the Situ Clan than five of your Cortes. You have no need to shield him from his enemies."

"He is still a man," retorted Lord Marak. "One arrow can end his life as easily as mine. Vengeance clouds a man's mind and makes him careless."

"You have just supplied your own answer," stated Tmundo. "What do you think the loss of your life will mean to Ukaro? How will he cope with your death if it is at the hands of a man he should have already killed, but did not because he was cavorting with his long lost lover?"

"The fact that you failed to tell him about Lord Ridak to shield him from harm," added Rykoma, "will add a twist to the knife of pain already in him. You are contemplating a path of remorse, young Marak. Talk with Ukaro and explain your feelings. He is a proud man, but he is also proud of you. He will not take offense at your words."

"They have traveled to the Sacred Lake of our ancestors," offered Tmundo. "I will order an escort to show you the way. It is high in the mountains above the trees and beyond the Golden Gates."

Lord Marak nodded and rose from his seat by the fire. His mind wandered from what he would say to Ukaro, to the upcoming confrontation with Lord Ridak as he paced around the campfire. In moments, his escorts arrived and Marak mounted a jaguar for the journey further into the mountains. The group did not speak as they traveled and Marak paid little attention to his surroundings until they entered a large clearing and he saw the glint of sunlight reflecting off something in the distance. The mountains rose starkly here and as they approached the glinting object, Marak's eyes widened in wonder. The grass of the clearing gave way to an ancient road paved with white rocks and sand. Straddling the road where it entered a narrow pass between two mountains was the source of glinting.

Marak stared in awe at what must be the Golden Gate. It was an enormous arch formed by a golden lion and a golden jaguar. They rose on their hind legs several man-heights tall with their forepaws meeting to form the arch. As they passed underneath, Marak wondered about the ancient civilization the Chula must have had before the Khadorans invaded. The craftsmanship of the arch and the road were not the only things amazing about this feat. The secrecy of its existence was another. The amount of gold in the arch would bring the entire armies of Khadora storming into these mountains if anyone even suspected it existed.

Shortly after passing under the Golden Gate, the party halted on a grassy rise overlooking a pristine lake. Two figures could be seen on the distant shoreline and Marak left the jaguar and his escorts and strode towards the lake.

He headed towards the Sacred Lake, but he moved slowly, lost in thought. He arrived at the lake all too soon and still didn't have his thoughts collected when he saw his mother and father lying on the grass at the lake's edge. He stood there silently for a moment soaking in a sight he had long dreamed of seeing. Glenda looked up and called to him and Marak strode over to greet his parents.

"You two are cavorting like a pair of youngsters," chuckled Lord Marak. "I feel like I am intruding."

"You will never be an intrusion in our lives, Marak," answered Glenda.

"Come and sit down, my Son the Torak," greeted Ukaro as he sat up. "We do not see enough of you these days."

"I have many things to keep me busy, Father," smiled Lord Marak. "You are welcome in Fardale. I know you do not appreciate living with the flatlanders, but they will accept you."

"I do not need their acceptance when I have yours," stated Ukaro. "Besides, I do not think it is wise for the flatlanders to know your father is a Chula. There may be times in the future when their lack of that knowledge will be helpful to you."

"As you wish," Lord Marak accepted as he sat down beside his parents. "I must talk with you about Lord Ridak."

Glenda's jaw tightened and her neck muscles tensed. The happy lines around Ukaro's eyes disappeared and his eyebrows lowered. "He is a most unwelcome topic," sighed Ukaro. "What is it you wish to discuss about him?"

"I want to discuss your need for revenge," Lord Marak blurted out. "I do not want to see the joy drain out of your face as I just have. I do not want to see my mother go stiff with tension when his name is brought up but, most of all, I do not want to see this family further marred by this man. I want you to forego your revenge and leave Lord Ridak to me."

"I believe that I have a prior claim on that son of a Situ," demanded the Head Shaman of the Zatong.

"Your claim is no older than mine," retorted Lord Marak, "and my Clan also has a claim."

"Will you two stop fighting!" exclaimed Glenda. "I have lived a nightmare under this man for fourteen years and the two of you act like his death is your property. No claim can take precedence over mine. Perhaps I should kill him myself."

Lord Marak and Ukaro stared at Glenda with open mouths. Neither of them had ever heard an offensive word out of her mouth before and they were shocked.

"Does it really matter who kills Lord Ridak?" Glenda continued. "Marak, do you believe that I would love you any less if you were not the one to kill Lord Ridak? Or you, Ukaro? Let the fates decide what happens to Lord Ridak. This family has been torn apart enough already. I will not permit the two of you to argue over who shall have the pleasure of killing that man."

Both men lowered their eyes, but it was Lord Marak who spoke. "I have to go to Lituk Valley in two days to meet with an emissary of the Lords Council. Lord Ridak seeks to regain title to Fardale. After he fails he will be coming to Fardale to forcibly take it back. I do not seek to deprive you of your revenge, Father, but it is a problem which I must deal with and I do not wish to take the chance of losing you again."

"You will not lose me to the likes of Lord Ridak," nodded Ukaro. "You are the Torak and you must do what you must do. I offer my services to the Torak for the upcoming battle. I do not insist that you take my offer and I will not take offense if you deliver the killing blow, but if there is a possibility of him being taken alive, I would like to take him captive."

"I will keep you informed of the situation," agreed Lord Marak. "If he can be captured, he is yours to do with as you wish. I am sorry for bringing this cloud into your day of sunshine. I must go and prepare for my journey."

Lord Marak rose to leave and Glenda rose and embraced him. Ukaro rose and hugged both of them and then Lord Marak turned and left. His mind was lost in thought on the journey back to Fardale and he appeared at the main gate before he realized the trip was over. He saw the Squad of Imperial Soldiers had arrived and hurried to Lord Marshal Yenga's study.

"I will be departing immediately," Lord Marak informed his Lord Marshal. "You must finalize plans for their attack. Lord Ridak is to be captured if possible."

"Do you think all of the Situ estates will be involved?" asked Lord Marshal Yenga.

"Absolutely," confirmed Lord Marak. "Lord Marshal Grefon will not want to take any chances of me escaping."

"I would like permission to station troops outside each of their estates," requested Lord Marshal Yenga. "If they pull the armies out of the estates, I can take each of them with a single Corte apiece."

"Can we afford the reduction in strength?" queried Lord Marak.

"They will all be Ragatha Cortes," explained Lord Marshal Yenga. "We will still have enough to accomplish our goal. I feel it is necessary to stop someone else from moving in and seizing the estates."

"Very well," conceded Lord Marak. "They must be kept out of sight and they must wear Torak uniforms when they take possession. Do we have enough uniforms to accomplish this?"

"The Seneschal has never stopped making them," smiled Lord Marshal Yenga. "We have enough to outfit every man in each of the four Clans if necessary."

"Good," nodded Lord Marak. "Have them wear their Ragatha Clan uniforms up to the time just before they take possession. I also want Cortain Tagoro's Corte to accompany me to Lituk Valley. They will not be permitted on the estate, but they can wait nearby. I do not trust Lord Marshal Grefon to act honestly."

"As you command," smiled Lord Marshal Yenga.

Lord Marak went out and introduced himself to the Squad Leader of the Imperial troops. As soon as Cortain Tagoro's Corte was ready, the column moved off towards Lituk Valley. The ride was slower and more comfortable than Lord Marak's last ride to Lituk Valley. The Imperial troops were friendly and curious about the new uniforms of the Torak Clan, but they were also alert and professional. They had no objection to riding with a Corte of Lord Marak's men and even suggested a place for the troops to wait while the meeting went on.

The party set up camp within sight of Lituk Valley, but outside the boundary of Lord Ridak's estate. Patrols of Situ soldiers came right up to the boundary all through the night and Lord Marak instructed Cortain Tagoro to move his men to a more hidden spot as soon as Lord Marak left with the Imperial Squad.

As Lord Marak was escorted towards the mansion at Lituk Valley, Lord Marak gazed around at the soldiers of the Situ Army. While there were sneers from some of the officers, most of the soldiers were more curious about the rise of one of their own than they were about facing the Torak Clan in battle. Obviously, the officers had been briefed about a potential conflict and the common soldiers had not.

Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon stood on the porch alongside the emissary from the Lords Council. The faces of the two highest ranking Situ men were masks of hatred. The emissary smiled politely and introduced himself. No greeting came from Lord Ridak or Lord Marshal Grefon and Lord Marak offered none in return. The emissary led the group to the Meeting Chamber and took the chair at the head of the table. Lord Marak sat across from Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon. The Situ guards were told to leave the chamber and were replaced by Imperial Soldiers.

"This meeting has been called by Lord Ridak of the Situ Clan to dispute the legality of ownership of the Fardale estate," began the emissary. "Do both parties agree to be bound by the ruling of this mediator?"

"Of course," spat Lord Ridak. "I have called for this session. The question is whether a man without honor like Marak will acknowledge your decision."

"The Torak Clan is willing to accept the judgment of the Lords Council," nodded Lord Marak.

"What is the Torak Clan?" asked the emissary. "I do not recognize your colors or your Clan."

"I am Lord Marak of the Torak Clan," declared Lord Marak. "I have exercised my rights under law as the Lord of an unaligned estate to create a new Clan. The black and silver are my colors. The Sword of Torak is my symbol. I ask the emissary of the Lords Council to recognize the legality of the Torak Clan and its ownership of the Fardale estate."

"Recognition is normally reserved for the Lords Council," the emissary pointed out, "and the reality of Fardale being an unaligned estate is the question for which we have assembled today."

"You, as mediator and emissary, are the Lords Council here today," smiled Lord Marak. "As such, your recognition is the same as recognition by the Lords Council. I request that you recognize the Torak Clan and myself as the Lord of the Clan when you have determined my ownership of the Fardale estate."

"Very well, Lord Marak," agreed the emissary. "If you succeed in proving that Fardale is an unaligned estate, I will grant you the recognition you request but, I warn you, the use of the Torak Clan name and colors will not be accepted if you lose."

"Unless I possess another unaligned estate," smiled Lord Marak.

The mediator cocked his head and studied Lord Marak for a moment. "That is not an issue which will be addressed today," decided the emissary. "We are here to discuss only Fardale. Lord Ridak, state your complaint."

"My complaint is simple," Lord Ridak began. "Marak is a soldier in the Situ Army and the son of a Situ slave. He was given the position of Lord of Fardale as a temporary measure until such time as I could find a suitable replacement for Lord Lashendo who died unexpectedly. He has taken the position under those arrangements and has since ignored all requests and pleas for communication and payments due to the Situ Clan. He has negotiated settlements with other Clans without informing me, the Head of the Situ Clan. He has made sworn members of the Situ Clan swear allegiance to him in violation of their Vows of Service to me. He has forcibly ejected my Lord Marshal from my Fardale estate. He has invaded my home and stolen a prisoner and killed two guards in the process. He has refused my direct order to relinquish control of Fardale and, finally, he has attempted to break ties with the Situ Clan and institute himself as the Lord of a new and fictitious Clan. I demand the Lords Council restore my property and deliver Marak to me for punishment."

"Very well," nodded the emissary. "These are very serious charges, Lord Marak. Unless you can refute these charges, the Lords Council will have to do as Lord Ridak requests. What do you have to say?"

Lord Marak looked down at the notes he had scribbled and addressed the emissary. "I was a soldier in the Situ Army when I was offered the position as Lord of Fardale," he began. "My mother used to be a Situ slave here in Lituk Valley. She is no longer here and she is no longer a slave. The fact that she is not here is known to both Lord Ridak and Lord Marshal Grefon. While Lord Lashendo did die unexpectedly, my appointment was not temporary. If it was meant to be temporary, I was lied to because I was told that it was permanent."

"That is not true," interrupted Lord Ridak. "I never told him the position was permanent."

"Lord Ridak," scolded the emissary, "please hold your tongue. Lord Marak will refute your charges. You will get a chance to argue about his statements later. Continue, Lord Marak."

"Thank you," nodded Lord Marak to the emissary. "As for failing to make payments to the Situ Clan, none have yet become due. We are still harvesting and the crop has not been sold. I was given control over Fardale because Lord Lashendo had gotten himself into a position where he could not fulfill his contracts. I assume Lord Ridak expected me to fail and blame me for the embarrassment. I did not fail, however. Fardale is no longer unable to fulfill its contracts. In fact, we have a surplus of grain which has not yet been contracted for."

Lord Marak paused to study the fury on Lord Ridak's face as he sipped a glass of water. "As for communications," continued Lord Marak, "there have been bandits in the hills between our two estates. We were not able to communicate with Lituk Valley and, I might add, Lituk Valley was unable to communicate with Fardale. We have not received one messenger from Lituk Valley since the day I assumed command of Fardale. In contrast, the one messenger we did manage to get to Lituk Valley was taken prisoner and tortured. I admit to breaking into Lord Ridak's mansion and rescuing my Cortain from his dungeon. It was unfortunate that his jailer and torturer refused to yield peacefully and had to be killed. If I was intent on killing Situ Clansmen, I would have killed Lord Marshal Grefon. I spoke with him in his study during the rescue. I left him with no more than a bruise upon his head."

Lord Marshal Grefon's face was a mask of rage and the Situ Lord Marshal's fingers were white as he clenched the edge of the table. Lord Marak smiled at him and continued. "I did have some border disputes with my neighbors in Fardale. A Lords Council emissary was called in but we negotiated a settlement before his arrival. We had agreed to keep the settlement private and it did not involve a lessening of Fardale's worth or value in any way. Lord Marshal Grefon attended the meeting with the emissary and tried to replace me as Lord of Fardale. I was polite to him, but firm in my resolve to maintain the confidentiality of the agreement with my neighbors. I ignored his attempt to replace me after the emissary from the Lords Council clarified that my pronouncement from Lord Ridak did not allow for me to be replaced as Lord of Fardale. He returned with me to Fardale and proceeded to make threats to me. When he threatened the life of my mother, whom I believed to be still in Lord Ridak's possession, I ordered him to get off the Fardale estate immediately."

"Wait a minute," interrupted the emissary. "You stated that an emissary from the Lords Council proclaimed your pronouncement as irrevocable?"

Lord Marak withdrew the pronouncement and handed it to the emissary. "He did," affirmed Lord Marak. "You will note that the pronouncement gives me absolute control over Fardale. As such, I have demanded that each of my subjects swear a Vow of Service directly to me. Not one of them owes any allegiance to Lord Ridak, and certainly not to Lord Marshal Grefon."

The emissary held up his hand for silence as he read the pronouncement. He scribbled notes furiously while nodding occasionally. Finally, he frowned and looked up. "Lord Ridak," he began, "this pronouncement gives Lord Marak absolute control. You have no authority over his dealings in Fardale and you can not replace him as Lord. Certainly, Lord Marshal Grefon has no right to be on the estate without the blessing and welcome of Lord Marak. The only control you have over Lord Marak is his Vows of Service and you will have to show that he has broken them to remove him as Lord of Fardale."

"What are you talking about?" stormed Lord Ridak. "I do not give absolute control to anyone. I certainly would never give it to the son of a slave."

The emissary showed Lord Ridak the clause and his signature. "It appears that you have done just that," decreed the emissary.

Lord Ridak shot a killing glare at Lord Marshal Grefon and then returned his gaze to the emissary. "Even still," he scowled, "this does not give him the right to seize my estate. If entering my home and killing my men does not constitute a violation of his Vows of Service, I can not imagine what does."

"Two valid points," agreed the emissary. "Lord Marak can you explain your reason for seizing Fardale and raising your own banner over it?"

"Certainly," Lord Marak nodded. "The Cortain whom I was forced to rescue from Lord Ridak's dungeon was sent here to ask for military help to ward off an attack on Fardale. Instead of supplying the military help which would keep Fardale safe from invasion, the messenger was jailed and tortured. Fardale was left to fend for itself like an abandoned estate."

"Are you certain that Lord Ridak or Lord Marshal Grefon were aware of the attack?" questioned the emissary. "Perhaps the messenger never delivered his message."

"I have since talked to my Cortain and he informed me that he did relay the message before he was tortured," affirmed Lord Marak.

"But you did not possess that information when you seized the estate," the emissary pointed out.

"That is true," conceded Lord Marak, "but I did possess other information. Marshal Tingo of the Ragatha Clan informed me that Lord Marshal Grefon invited the Ragatha to attack Fardale in hopes of removing me from power. Lord Marshal Grefon assured Marshal Tingo that Lituk Valley would not raise a finger to defend me. As far as I am concerned, it was at that moment that the Situ Clan forfeited all rights and claims to the Fardale estate. If the Lord Marshal wishes to contradict my statement, I can produce Marshal Tingo for his testimony."

"You can produce the Ragatha Marshal for testimony?" quizzed the emissary.

"Yes," declared Lord Marak. "He is still the Marshal of Woodville, but he works for me now. The Ragatha Clan forfeited Woodville to me following their defeat."

"What?" shouted Lord Ridak. "Are you trying to get us to believe that you defeated the entire Ragatha Clan Army? This is preposterous. I can not listen to any more of these lies."

The emissary rose and signaled for the Squad Leader of the Imperial troops. "Squad Leader, we need to speak with Marshal Tingo of Woodville, unless you have gathered information on this subject."

Lord Marak picked up on the meaning of the emissary's words and realized that the Imperial troops performed more than one task. They were used to gather information for the mediators. This explained their overt friendliness and was a fact which Lord Marak would never forget.

"Lord Marak speaks the truth according to what Marshal Tingo revealed to me," the Squad Leader reported. "Woodville is now a Torak estate and Marshal Tingo is the Marshal."

The emissary nodded and the Squad Leader returned to his post. "That certainly is justification of abandonment," observed the emissary, "but you are still a subject of Lord Ridak's and, as such, you are subject to the Vows of Service you have sworn. I am afraid that you have merely enlarged the Situ holdings to include Woodville."

"Not exactly," warned Lord Marak as he looked into Lord Ridak's eyes. "I have never sworn Vows of Service to Lord Ridak or anyone else."

Lord Ridak launched himself to his feet and the Imperial guards stiffened and prepared to intercede. "I will not listen to any more lies," screamed Lord Ridak. "A man who disavows his own word and steals my lands does not belong in the same room with me."

The Imperial Squad Leader moved and stood behind Lord Ridak and the emissary stood and indicated that Lord Ridak should sit back down. After Lord Ridak was seated and calm restored, the emissary turned to Lord Marak. "Can you prove your statement?" he asked.

"The important question is whether Lord Ridak can prove that I did," declared Lord Marak. "As Lord of Fardale, I keep written records of every Vow given. Does Lord Ridak have the same? I arrived in Lituk Valley with my mother when I was six years old, the normal time for swearing. My mother was forced into slavery by Lord Ridak and I was hysterical for days. I was put in the care of Flora, the minder for the household, and she took care of me and comforted me. When I recovered, no one thought about my swearing. It was taken for granted that I had already sworn. Flora was the only person who knew, but she was afraid of Lord Ridak's wrath if she mentioned it, so she did not. I beg the emissary from the Lords Council to remove this woman from the premises when he leaves. Now that I have disclosed her secret, her life will be forfeit if she is left here."

The emissary nodded to the Squad Leader and he left the room and returned with Flora. Flora cringed when asked about Lord Marak's swearing and she pointedly avoided looking at Lord Ridak, but she confirmed Lord Marak's story in a sobbing voice. The emissary ordered the Squad Leader to remove the woman and pack her belongings.

"This has been a most unusual case," summarized the emissary. "Without Vows of Service to Lord Ridak, Lord Marak has done nothing wrong. He is legally entitled to the Fardale estate without compensation to Lord Ridak in any manner. He will need to compensate Lord Ridak for the removal of his minder, but I feel his voluntary service in the Situ Army should be sufficient for that compensation. As I have promised, the Lords Council recognizes the Torak Clan and it will be so recorded in the records of the Lords Council. This is my ruling on this matter. As I have said, so shall it be recorded before the Lords Council. This case is closed."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 26

Blood Valley

Lord Ridak rose and watched Lord Marak leave with the emissary. As soon as the door the Meeting Chamber closed he turned his wrath on Lord Marshal Grefon. "I want him dead," ordered Lord Ridak. "You will make sure that he never returns to Fardale alive."

"We dare not attack him while he is with the Imperial troops," cautioned Lord Marshal Grefon. "The Lords Council would declare all of the Situ holdings forfeit if we did."

"The Imperial troops will not escort him home," shouted Lord Ridak. "You told me he brought an entire Corte of his own men with him. Do you think the Imperial troops will bother escorting him when he has such a large bodyguard?"

"I will see to it," accepted Lord Marshal Grefon. "What about Fardale?"

"We attack it and take it back," sneered Lord Ridak. "What do you think we are going to do? You expect me to just let it go? Send the runners immediately. I want every soldier we own amassed to attack Fardale. I not only want Lord Marak dead, but we shall kill every man, woman and child that has sworn to him. No Situ will ever be allowed to swear to another Lord. I don't want to stop at Fardale, either. We shall continue into Woodville and claim it for the Situ Clan."

"I am not sure that it is wise to attack him on his home ground," advised Lord Marshal Grefon. "If he did defeat the Ragatha Clan, he might be able to cause us more casualties than you will find acceptable."

"I don't believe for a minute that he defeated the Ragatha Clan," snorted Lord Ridak. "He may have talked his way into getting his hands on Woodville, but I am sure that he gave up more than he got. His Torak Clan probably owes allegiance to the Ragatha scum."

"Your plan risks everything to conquer one small estate," cautioned Lord Marshal Grefon. "We will lose the initiative at Raven's Point by pursuing Marak."

"And we will be the laughing stock of the entire country if he is allowed to live," shouted Lord Ridak. "Follow my orders, Lord Marshal, or you will end up in the slave compound. I can think of a few soldiers who would love to watch you work the fields."

* * * *

"How did it go?" asked Cortain Tagoro.

"We have been recognized as the Torak Clan and the owners of Fardale," smiled Lord Marak. "We need to move quickly and not directly towards Fardale. I do not think Lord Ridak will wait long before pursuing us."

"Do you think they will attack Fardale or just come after us?" quizzed the Cortain.

"Both," answered Lord Marak. "If the Imperial Guards weren't there, I would be dead already. I hope Lord Marshal Yenga has a reception planned for our visitors. There will not be enough time for trenches in this battle."

"So, there will be no bloodless victory this time," sighed Cortain Tagoro.

"No," affirmed Lord Marak. "A lot of good men are going to die this time. Let us hope that more of them are Situs than Toraks."

Cortain Tagoro ordered his men to mount up and led the group into the forest away from Lituk Valley. He sent scouts out in each direction to alert him if the enemy drew near. After several hours of riding they stopped to rest and the scouts reported in. Cortain Tagoro received their reports and sent new scouts out before going to Lord Marak.

"They have three Cortes on our tail," informed Cortain Tagoro. "They have located our campsite from last night and the track we used to leave it. We can not be sure that there are not other Cortes heading directly towards Fardale on the road to get in front of us."

"I knew Lord Ridak would like to kill me," sighed Lord Marak, "but his swiftness is surprising. His troops must have left Lituk Valley right after the Imperial troops. I would have suspected Lord Marshal Grefon to proceed more cautiously after losing the last Corte sent towards Fardale, but I saw a lot of new faces in his army. I imagine he has recruited in all of his estates for the planned offensive at Raven's Point. Now he will use them against us."

"Should we make for the road and a speedy trip home?" queried Cortain Tagoro.

"No," answered Lord Marak. "Let's lead these Cortes around the woods for a while. If we can get the three Cortes to separate, we will attack them individually. If not, we will just be taking the long way home. I am sure that the road will have additional Cortes already on it."

The Torak Corte ended their rest period and continued their trek through the woods. Periodically, one of the scouts would come in and report to Cortain Tagoro, but contact with the enemy was avoided. Towards nightfall, Tagoro replaced the scouts again and asked to be notified the moment the Situ made camp for the night. Lord Marak suggested a few raids on the Situ camps during the night to make them more cautious the next day. The sun set and darkness came without word of the Situ making camp.

Cortain Tagoro sent another scout out to make sure his men were still alive and he returned with the news that the Situ did not appear to even be looking for a campsite.

"I don't understand," Cortain Tagoro said to Lord Marak, "Lord Marshal Grefon has never authorized night operations before. Why are they still trailing us?"

"Because he wants me very badly," answered Lord Marak. "If I guess correctly, Lord Marshal Grefon's freedom may rest on my shoulders. I suspect that the Cortes following us have orders not to stop until I am caught. I did make him look rather incompetent in the Meeting Chamber this morning."

"If we were facing something closer to even odds," commented Cortain Tagoro, "I would loop up behind them and attack them from the rear."

"What bothers me," offered Lord Marak, "is that they have not pushed to the point of contact with us. It is almost as if Lord Marshal Grefon is using three Cortes for a tracking party. That is extremely large for trackers. I think they are meant to keep our attention while someone else closes in. I should have thought of this earlier, but their failure to stop at sunset triggered my alarm."

"Are you suggesting that there are other Cortes out here heading for us?" questioned Cortain Tagoro.

"Yes," replied Lord Marak. "I wouldn't be surprised to find the entire Lituk Valley Army in this forest hunting for us. We are in trouble, Cortain. I want more forward scouts out immediately. Start laying traps

behind us to slow the Situ down. If you can capture one of their scouts, find out what their orders are. Other than that, we need to keep this column moving."

"As you command, Lord Marak," saluted Cortain Tagoro.

The Torak Corte moved on into the night. It was not long before one of the scouts reported another Situ Army heading for them from another direction. Cortain Tagoro altered his course and ordered an increase in the speed of the troops. The traps helped to slow the pursuing Cortes, but did not dissuade them from following. Around midnight, Cortain Tagoro called a halt to the procession.

"What it is, Cortain Tagoro?" asked Lord Marak.

"There is another Corte up ahead," reported the Cortain. "This group is camped for the night."

"Lord Marshal Grefon had troops already stationed in the forest," swore Lord Marak. "He planned on me trying to escape whether I won or not. How could I have been so blind? How much lead do we have on the Situ following us?"

"One hour for sure, two at the most," answered Cortain Tagoro.

"Draw me a map," ordered Lord Marak.

Cortain Tagoro called for a torch and started drawing a crude map in the dirt. When he completed the map, Lord Marak studied it for a while.

"We are going to attack the campsite, Cortain," smiled Lord Marak as he took the stick and pointed to a spot on the map. "I want to proceed to about here. At this point the men will dismount and you will have some men take the horses off in this direction. They will make sure that the trail is evident. The rest of us will proceed on foot to the campsite. I want the horses to proceed in a loop wide enough to avoid their flanking scouts and return to the campsite. We will have that much time to kill the camping Situ."

"But the Cortes behind us will be very close by then," protested Cortain Tagoro. "You risk having us surrounded by the Situ."

"I do," agreed Lord Marak. "However, I believe that your training will prove to be sufficient to eliminate the campsite before the other Cortes arrive. After we deal with the campsite, Gunta and Halman will remain behind with me. You will lead the rest of the men in a straight line for the Sorgan border. The vision of a dead Situ Corte will slow down our pursuers more than the traps we have been setting. Halman, Gunta, and I will start attacking their scouts."

"I fail to see the wisdom in your plan, Lord Marak," objected Cortain Tagoro. "Lord Marshal Grefon is sending his army into the woods at night to capture you, not my men. How does my Corte abandoning you aid our cause and not his?"

"For one," smiled Lord Marak, "my trail will be harder to follow with only three of us. The sheer number of men accompanying me is making their job easier, yet we still need to get word to Lord Marshal Yenga that the Situ will be attacking. The Situ will stop chasing you and your men and embark on the more difficult task of tracking me."

"Why would they stop tracking me?" protested Cortain Tagoro. "They wouldn't even know ... you plan on making sure that they know you have stayed behind! That is suicide, My Lord. I can not allow you to

do this."

"You have no choice, Cortain," ordered Lord Marak. "The three of us have evaded the Situ before and we shall do so again. Lord Marshal Grefon may have ordered them to chase us through the night, but the Situ are not night fighters, we are. Now, we can continue this discussion and waste valuable time or we can put my plan into action. I appreciate your feelings, Tagoro, but I think this is the best plan we can come up with."

Very well, My Lord," saluted Cortain Tagoro. "I will get the men prepared."

Lord Marak watched Cortain Tagoro storm off and brief his men on the plan. The men kept glancing over at Lord Marak as they listened to the plan and he knew that Cortain Tagoro had not hidden his feelings very well, but he also knew that his old friend would follow his orders. The Corte mounted and rode in silence to the spot Lord Marak had selected. A dozen men had to be assigned to take the horses and set a false trail while the rest marched towards the camped Situ Corte.

Lord Marak smiled in appreciation as he watched Tagoro's men professionally take up their positions in the woods surrounding the campsite. There would be no call for surrender this time. Lord Marak had no way to take captives in a forest surrounded by his enemy. At Tagoro's signal, the Torak archers let fly a murderous barrage. The campsite leaped to alertness as the first arrows struck home, but the defenders were dazed and confused. The Situ soldiers ran for swords when they should have reached for their bows. They allowed the illuminating campfire to remain lit, while the darkness enshrouded the Torak men. The bulk of the Situ soldiers succumbed to arrows and the Torak soldiers moved into the campsite to finish the attack.

One wounded Situ soldier tried vainly to reach his sword and Lord Marak halted the killing blow one of Tagoro's men was about to deliver. With hand signals, Lord Marak indicated that the man should be spared and everyone intentionally ignored the wounded Situ.

"Cortain Tagoro, shouted Lord Marak with a wink, "I am ordering your men to return to Fardale immediately. I will keep two of them to accompany me. Perhaps it is time for me to go back to Lituk Valley and put an end to Lord Ridak personally."

Cortain Tagoro grimaced and he responded. "As you wish, Lord Marak. There may be other Situ scum in the forest. I will try to draw them off as I return home."

Neither of them had lied, but the information they wanted to convey to the wounded soldier had been stated. The Torak men had to wait another five minutes before their horses arrived and Cortain Tagoro bid farewell to Lord Marak. Lord Marak and his two selected men made a point of heading eastward out of the campsite, while Cortain Tagoro led his men westward. Lord Marak estimated that the Situ Cortes would arrive in about a half-hour and hoped the wounded man survived to greet them. He had not enjoyed killing the men at the campsite, but it had been preferable to the slaughter of his own men.

With a grimace of his own, Lord Marak led his two men into the darkness of the forest.

* * * *

Cortain Rybak sat in the communications room sharpening his sword. He itched to be out on the front lines getting ready for the Situ attack, but Lord Marshal Yenga had not declared him fit for service yet. While it was true that Rybak had trouble getting around, it still bothered him that others would be fighting a battle which he yearned to participate in. He was almost saddened to find out that Lord Marak had killed Koors. The pain Koors had inflicted on him deserved more of a payback than a simple death could deliver. The Chula healer had done things to him that he had never seen done before and it still amazed

Gunta and Halman that he was even able to walk again. The scars still covered his body, but the pain of the burns and cuts was only a memory, although it was still a very vivid memory to Rybak. At least Rybak had the pleasure of knowing that he had told Koors nothing despite the repeated torture sessions.

He smiled inwardly at Lord Marshal Grefon's displeasure with the inability of Koors to gain any information.

"Cortain Rybak," came the voice out of thin air, "the Situ are still gathering on the road, but they are not advancing. Can you contact Lectain Zorkil and find out if his scouts have returned with any information?"

"Certainly, Lord Marshal Yenga," answered Cortain Rybak. "I will get right back to you."

The magic of the Air Tubes still amazed Cortain Rybak. Lord Marshal Yenga was off in the hills leading into Fardale and yet his voice sounded as if it came from the same room. Cortain Rybak nodded to the Air Mage and she adjusted the channel to Lectain Zorkil.

"Lectain Zorkil," called Cortain Rybak, "the Lord Marshal wants to know if your scouts have returned any information."

"Nothing certain," the Lectain replied. "The Situ Armies continue to gather. I have had to limit the area of my scouts because the Situ have roving patrols all along the border. Has Lord Marak returned yet?"

"We have had no word since Cortain Tagoro returned," answered Cortain Rybak. "If we do hear from him I will let everyone know."

"Good," stated Lectain Zorkil. "Let Lord Marshal Yenga know that the gathering of the Situ is spreading out over here. It is almost as if they are building a human wall out there."

"I will inform him," Cortain Rybak said.

He relayed the information to Lord Marshal Yenga who was not enthusiastic about the news from Lectain Zorkil. In fact, Lord Marshal Yenga was becoming concerned with the unusual tactics of the Situ Army. Once again, the Lord Marshal walked up to the observation point and peered down at the Situ gathering on the road.

"What do you make of this, Cortain Tagoro?" asked the Lord Marshal. "It is unlike anything I have ever seen. Why are they so spread out and why aren't they attacking?"

"I was told that I might find you two up here," came the voice from behind them. "What is the situation?"

Lord Marshal Yenga and Cortain Tagoro whirled at the sound of Lord Marak's voice. "Where in Khadora have you been?" greeted the Lord Marshal. "You have the entire Army concerned about your whereabouts."

"The Situ trackers were persistent," shrugged Lord Marak. "They had to be taught a lesson in humility. Why are the Situ gathering and not attacking?"

"Cortain Tagoro," ordered Lord Marshal Yenga, "inform Cortain Rybak that our Lord has returned. Make sure that the word is spread to every unit."

Cortain Tagoro smiled broadly as he saluted and headed back to where the Air Mage kept the communications link to the mansion.

"I don't know what they are up to," admitted Lord Marshal Yenga. "They are not only gathering on the road, either. I have Lectain Zorkil south of here and he reports a similar gathering by him. They seem to approach to within bowshot and then retreat a little ways before gathering. It is as if they are probing the line looking for a weak spot. I have never seen anything like it."

"I have," frowned Lord Marak. "I did not realize that Lord Marshal Grefon even paid attention to our war games. I used this very method against some of the other Situ teams last year. The idea is to keep the defenders on edge and unaware of where you will strike. You spread your forces out across the entire line and the defender has to do likewise, but you have the advantage of knowing where you will attempt to break through. That is what all of the probing is about. He is trying to decide on his entry point."

"Is there anything we can do to affect his choice?" queried the Lord Marshal.

Lord Marak appeared to be lost in thought as he gazed down at the amassing Situ Army. Lord Marshal Yenga noticed several bloodied cuts in the Lord's uniform and was about to ask about them when Lord Marak suddenly whirled towards him.

"We need to bring up the reserves from Woodville," Lord Marak said excitedly. "The Situ are not going to turn and attack us from the rear like I did in the games last year. They are going to run straight for Fardale. Lord Ridak will try to use the civilians as shields while he holds our own estate against us."

"What makes you believe that?" asked Lord Marshal Yenga.

"Cortain Koors commented on my strategy when I used it," answered Lord Marak. "He commented that while I had been lucky to break through, I should have gone after the prize instead of fighting the defenders. Koors learned his fighting strategy from Grefon. He will go for our civilians."

"That is sound enough logic for me," allowed Lord Marshal Yenga, "but bringing up the reserves will not solve the problem of defending against his strategy."

"It will," assured Lord Marak. "Do not bring them all the way to the front. Keep them a short distance back and out of sight, then break your line in the center and start peeling it back to create a funnel. Lord Ridak will find his weak spot in our line soon enough. When he does he will be making a dash towards Fardale. That is when we bring in the sides of the funnel and surround him."

"I believe you are right," grinned Lord Marshal Yenga. "I will arrange our reception shortly. Have you had those wounds looked at yet?"

"They are minor wounds," answered Lord Marak. "Halman was not so lucky. Gunta has taken him to the mansion for healing. Get our trap set up quickly. I do not wish a falling sun to give the Situ an excuse to delay another day."

* * * *

Klora ducked behind a large tree to avoid being seen by the Situ soldier. There should not have been a Situ soldier anywhere near the mages' practice field. After all, the field was home to the mages because it was out of the way and not on a direct route to anywhere. Klora leaned around the tree and watched the Situ soldier. He appeared to be looking for something or someone. His head constantly turned and his eyes darted back and forth. As if forgetting something, the Situ soldier suddenly turned and went back the way he had come. Klora waited until he was out of sight before she turned and ran back into the

practice field which she had left for personal reasons. Quickly, she waved all of the mages together and explained what she had seen.

"He is probably a scout," offered Wogra, a Water Mage.

"Then more will be coming," declared Iscala, an Air Mage.

"Iscala," ordered Klor, "inform the control center immediately. Lord Marshal Yenga will send some troops here to take care of them."

"I have been monitoring what is going on," frowned Iscala, "and I don't think they will be able to. Lord Marak has returned and they are preparing for a big battle. They have even called up the reserve forces out of Woodville."

"Even if they could spare the men," stated Glenda, "it would likely take too long for them to get here in time to protect us. We have been training to be battle mages. It is time for one more practice session, but this time our targets will be live."

Klor stood and looked at the other mages present. There was fear in their faces, but there was also determination and eagerness. Most of the mages were former slaves and each of them had vowed never to permit themselves to be enslaved again. There was little doubt what the Situ Clan would do with them if Fardale was defeated. They had all made a solemn pledge to follow Lord Marak, not only because of their Vows of Service, but because he had freed them and was worthy of their pledge.

"Very well," Klor declared, "the first battle of the Mage Corps is about to begin. Each of you knows your specialties and I will not presume to know how to organize a battle. Everyone will stay out of sight as long as possible before attacking. One thing we must make sure of, no Situ soldier will remain alive to talk about our use of magic in battle. Lord Marak made it clear that he wants to hide our new found abilities. Iscala, you should lead a group into the forest and be prepared to kill any soldiers trying to retreat. Make sure that your group remains hidden until the last soldier has passed you. Everyone else find places around the edges of the practice field. Nobody should enter the field once the battle begins. It will be a killing zone."

The mages scattered and hid in the woods. Some scrambled under piles of leaves and some behind bushes or boulders while others created small fog patches lying on the ground. The Mage Corps did not have long to wait. The scout returned at the head of a large column of men. The Situ soldiers entered the field and nothing happened as they spread out and looked around. The lead part of the column was almost ready to exit the field and continue on their journey when a Cortain stopped and pulled out a map.

Troops were still straggling into the field when Klor started the attack by using heat to melt the officer's armor. The Cortain's screams signaled the other mages to start their own attack. Some soldiers began exploding from their own internal pressures. Others clawed at their armor in a vain attempt to remove the liquefying metal. Every rock and boulder within the field exploded into thousands of flying rock slivers which found their way into the bodies of the Situ soldiers. Large logs flew onto the field smashing soldiers from their horses. Large trees from the edges of the fields rolled across the ground knocking down everyone and everything in their path. Fire broke out among the heap of bodies and the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

The battle lasted only a few moments. The practice field was so large that the test of one's ability to cast spells at a distance was determined by whether or not the mage could affect something at the other end of the field. Now that field was an inferno of Situ bodies and burning horses. Not one arrow had been

fired nor had a single sword been drawn, but five hundred dead Situ soldiers and five hundred horses lay polluting the air. The only sound was the crackling of the flames and a last screaming cry from a few of the Situ attackers.

* * * *

Lord Marshal Grefon charged through the gap in the Torak defenses with the rest of his soldiers. Even Lord Ridak urged his horse to go faster as they began the race to the mansion at Fardale. A wicked, spiteful smile adorned the Situ Lord's face as he thought about his final victory over Lord Marak. The Situ soldiers flew past the Situ Lord as they eagerly sought the enemy.

Lord Marshal Grefon cursed as he heard the twang of bows before him. There should not be any troops this far from the front and he wondered if they had inadvertently caught up with some of the retreating Fardale troops. His thoughts grew more contemplative when the charging men in front of him halted. His Cortains were ordering the men to dismount and take up their bows. Those orders would not be given if the resistance was light.

Lord Marshal Grefon whirled to seek some high ground so he could view the battlefield. That was when he saw the flanks closing in on his men.

"We are being surrounded," the Lord Marshal shouted. "Retreat and regroup immediately. Retreat and regroup."

"We are not retreating," hollered Lord Ridak as he waved his sword menacingly towards Lord Marshal Grefon. "We are almost there. Order your men forward, Lord Marshal. I will not be denied my victory by your incompetence again. Get them moving."

Lord Marshal Grefon fought the urge to strike out at Lord Ridak. Instead, he dutifully turned and ordered his men to mount and fight their way through the enemy. When the men hesitated, Lord Marshal Grefon took the lead himself, urging his soldiers onward. The road passed through a clump of trees up ahead and the Lord Marshal could already see the flanking attackers closing off any routes around the trees. In a blind rage, the Lord Marshal charged down the road as he saw soldiers on both sides of him dropping with arrows in their bodies.

While the battle raged around him, Lord Marshal Grefon's eyes narrowed to a solitary black figure standing in the middle of the road ahead of him, the figure's long black cape blowing in the wind. As the soldiers around him veered off the road to engage the enemy, Lord Marshal Grefon drew his sword and charged directly towards Lord Marak. Lord Marak stood in the road with his feet placed apart and discarded his bow. In one smooth motion, Lord Marak reached back and drew his wicked-looking sinuous sword and stood defiantly waiting for the charging horse to reach him. Lord Marshal Grefon urged his mount faster and laughed as he prepared to take off Lord Marak's head as he flew past.

At the last minute Lord Marak dropped to the side of the road and swung his sword. Lord Marshal Grefon struggled to comprehend what was happening as the horse slid downward and its chest impacted with the road. Lord Marshal Grefon went flying through the air and landed flat on his back. Dazed for a moment, he was startled when his sword was thrown on his chest, hilt first. He grabbed the sword and looked up. Lord Marak stood waiting for Grefon to rise.

"I believe it was me you were looking for," smiled Lord Marak. "Well, you have found me. Let us see how fine a swordsman you are."

Lord Marshal Grefon scrambled to his feet and steadied himself. "You haven't asked me to surrender,"

laughed Lord Marshal Grefon. "I guess you are not too sure of yourself, after all."

"I have a fine Lord Marshal already," smiled Lord Marak. "I can not even think of a position for which you are fit. Fardale has no slaves."

Lord Marshal Grefon spat on the road, his face a contorted mask of hatred. "You shall wish you were a slave before I get done with you," he screamed as he charged Lord Marak.

Lord Marak stood and waited for Lord Marshal Grefon to close. He sidestepped the mad charge and swung his sword viciously. He quickly turned as Lord Marshal Grefon screamed and saw Grefon's forearm lying in the road, still clutching its sword.

"What are you waiting for?" screamed Lord Marshal Grefon. "Finish it."

"I don't kill unarmed men," smiled Lord Marak. "I guess you will have to live with what you have left."

Lord Marshal Grefon bent and picked up his sword with his left hand, shaking his lost forearm loose. "You shall not leave me a cripple," screamed Lord Marshal Grefon as he crazily charged Lord Marak again.

As the Situ got closer, Lord Marak dropped to one knee and extended his sinuous sword. Either Lord Marshal Grefon did not see it, or he did not care, but he ran until he impaled himself on Lord Marak's sword. Lord Marak rose and wiped his sword on the green and yellow uniform of the Situ Lord Marshal and strode down the road in search of Lord Ridak. The fighting was practically over as Lord Marak exited the clump of trees. The road was awash with blood and bodies lay everywhere. Most of the bodies wore green and yellow and Lord Marak silently issued his thanks. Hundreds of Situ had thrown down their weapons and surrendered, hundreds more had not and were dead. Lord Ridak was one of the ones who had surrendered.

Lord Marak called for two horses and a soldier promptly brought them over to him. He indicated that Lord Ridak should mount and then proceeded to mount the other horse.

"You are coming with me, Lord Ridak," Lord Marak declared. "If you try to run away, you will suffer greatly. If you ride peaceably, I will not harm you."

"Where are you taking me?" demanded Lord Ridak.

Lord Marak did not answer. He took hold of Lord Ridak's reins and led him towards the hills and the dense forest of their slopes. Before they got too far into the forest, they were surrounded by Chula warriors. One Chula made his way forward through the others and stood before the horses. His lion-like face and long mane identified him as a Shaman. Lord Ridak cringed at the sight of the barbarians and started to visibly shake.

"Lord Ridak," grinned Lord Marak, "I would like to introduce you to Ukaro Zaton, the Head Shaman of the Zaton Tribe. He is someone whom you tried to find many years ago. He is the husband of Glenda. He is my father."

"Your father?" howled Lord Ridak. "But he is ... he is an animal."

"Tsk, tsk," scolded Lord Marak. "It is not polite to talk ill of your owner that way."

"My owner?" cried Lord Ridak. "You can not do this. I demand to be taken prisoner, not turned over to these savages."

"He learns slowly, Father," smiled Lord Marak. "You will have to be patient with him. When he learns what you have planned for him, he will probably keep you up all night pleading for death. He does babble on so. Please return the horse when you are done with it. That is something I do have a use for."

* * * *

"Thank you, Kasa, for that report," said Lord Marak. "That pretty much finishes up the loose ends except for our new Situ estates. I have asked each of you Council members for your input on what we should do with our new properties and your suggestions were excellent. I have decided to keep two of the estates in addition to Fardale as Torak Clan estates. The other three will remain as Situ estates to preserve that seat in the Assembly of Lords."

Lord Marak looked at the sea of bobbing heads around the table of the Meeting Chamber. This session was open to anyone who wished to attend and the room was packed. "Kasa," Lord Marak continued, "I have read your report on the progress of your assistant, Elsa, and I am pleased with her progress. I am going to appoint her as the Bursar of Lituk Valley. It is high time that more women entered the realm of finance and the two of you will make Khadora sit up and take notice."

A round of applause thundered through the room and only after it died down did Lord Marak hear the voice calling for his attention. "Lord Marak," Cortain Rybak called out, "I ... I would like to know if you are considering any military transfers to Lituk Valley. If it is possible ... if you could see your way to..."

"I suppose you are going to ask if I will allow you to become a Cortain in the Situ Army, Cortain Rybak?" asked Lord Marak. "If that is your question, the answer is no. The Situ Army has enough candidates for the officer positions."

Cortain Rybak's eyes lowered and he nodded his understanding. Lord Marak pushed his way through the crowd and put his arm around the ex-spy. "Besides," Lord Marak smiled, "I have something more important for you. You are to be the new Lord of the Situ Clan. Manage it well, Lord Rybak."

THE END

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Other titles by Richard S. Tuttle

The Khadora Collection

Forgotten Legacy

Ages ago the peaceful continent was invaded by savage conquerors. The invading army sought not only to rule and own the land, but to exterminate the indigenous peoples. Survivors of the peace-loving inhabitants of the continent escaped the slaughter and reformed their meager civilizations to learn the arts of war and magic awaiting word from the gods to extract their revenge and retake their homelands.

The series starts in the country of Khadora with *Young Lord of Khadora* in which the son of a slave seeks to reform a government bent on feudal wars and disrespect for mages and the indigenous peoples.

Star of Sakovata takes place in Omunga, a neighboring country to Khadora and features a young female

mage student who is suddenly and brutally thrust into a position of leadership of a strange indigenous people.

Web of Deceit is centered in Fakara the third country of the continent and features a young man whose destiny is to create a financial empire that will aid in overthrowing the invaders.

Aakuta: the Dark Mage introduces a mysterious male mage as the series returns to Khadora. Lord Marak undertakes battling thousands of Jiadin warriors invading Khadora as members of the Lords Council try to assassinate him.

Island of Darkness returns to the Sakova as an evil mage takes over the government of Omunga declares war on the Sakovans. Complicating the war is the need to preserve the armies of both countries if the coming invasion is to be defeated. Two young women on a sea voyage happen upon the Island of Darkness where Vand is assembling his massive army to invade Omunga and Sakova. If they manage to escape the island to tell their story, their tales will chill the citizens of both countries.

Elvangar introduces the land of the elves and the chaos that reigns there. The line of Kieran which has ruled the elves for a thousand years appears to be at an end. Marak, in an attempt to enlist the aid of the elves in the coming struggle, sanctions a trip to the secret land of Elvangar. Meanwhile the drums of war continue to beat loudly on the Island of Darkness.

In *Winged Warrior*, the world teeters on the brink of war, but Marak's allies are not prepared to defend their homelands. The god-like Vand has inserted spies into the forces on the mainland, and each country is beset with troubles that threaten to destroy mankind.

Army of the Dead concludes the series as Vand's massive minions invade in several different locations. Worst of all for Marak and his allies, Vand has an additional army that no one has planned for; it is an army that died a thousand years ago.

The series is comprised of eight volumes alternating between the three countries with the final volumes drawing them all together.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Young Lord of Khadora

Young Lord of Khadora features Marak, a young soldier in the service of one of the smaller clans of Khadora who is chosen as a sacrifice for the benefit of his lord. Recognizing his promotion as the sacrifice it is intended to be, Marak uses every trick available to thwart the plans of his lord and change the very fabric of society.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Star of Sakova

Star of Sakova is the tale of Lyra, a young woman who survives a deadly attack on the magic academy run by her parents. Her flight from the army of assassins following her, forces Lyra to enter the dreaded

Sakova, a land of magic and strange beasts, a land that nobody returns from.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Web of Deceit

Web of Deceit is the story of Rejji, a young man from a small village in a barren wasteland. When his village is destroyed, Rejji heads off into the world in the company of a small, female thief, only to discover that he is being chased by bandits, slavers, and evil magicians. The future of Fakara rests on the shoulders of a man barely past his boy-years.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Aakuta: the Dark Mage

Aakuta: the Dark Mage Lord Marak tries to gain support from the lords of Khadora as the Jiadin invasion begins. Complicating the situation is the arrival of a male mage, something unheard of in Khadora.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Island of Darkness

Just as peace between Omunga and Sakova appears to be a certainty, an evil mage steals the body of the newly chosen Katana, leader of the Omungan people. As the new Katana plots the destruction of the Sakova, a strange mystical disease ravages the country producing widespread famine. Both countries stand poised to annihilate each other, but the Star of Sakova fears a greater threat, which is brewing unseen across the ocean. To confront that new threat, she must preserve the armies of her Omungan enemy. Against all odds, she embarks upon a path towards a peaceful solution to the war, a path that could likely imperil the very existence of her own people.

Meanwhile, two young orphans discover that they are sisters and set out from the Sakova on an ocean voyage to discover their roots. What they discover is enough to terrorize both the Omungans and the Sakovans, if the young sisters manage to escape the Island of Darkness to tell their story.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Elvangar

Thousands of years ago, humans attacked Elvangar, the land of the elves. The elves responded with a devastating attack, which ended with the sealing of the human city of Anragar. Sealed by the hand of Kaltara and hidden in an impenetrable jungle, Anragar has remained dormant waiting for the prophesized Astor to arrive and reopen the gates.

Now that the Time of Calling has arrived, Angragar has awakened, and the elves of Elvangar prepare for a human invasion. Caught in the middle are four elves who have escaped from the Island of Darkness. Eltor, Caldal, Mistake, and MistyTrail tread carefully in both lands as the world prepares for a war unlike any other in history.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Winged Warrior

In ancient days, the mightiest of dragons were fearless in battle against the foes of Kaltara. Those special dragons were called Winged Warriors, and they were revered by the elves. In Winged Warrior, the Torak meets a Winged Warrior and learns that she is to become his battle steed.

The Time of Cleansing fast approaches as the Motangans plant a spy deep within the ruling circle of the Sakovans. The mage-spy Aakuta is discovered on the Island of Darkness and condemned to death, while rebellious Khadoran lords conspire to overthrow Emperor Marak. The elven nation is beset by plotting from antiwar factions, while the Jiadin of Fakara threaten to abandon their defensive positions.

The world teeters on the brink of new war, a war in which there will be no surrenders, no prisoners, and no negotiations, only total annihilation. Life itself hangs in the balance as Vand's minions prepare to launch the final invasion and sow seeds of deceit and destruction in the camps of the defenders.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Army of the Dead

Massive armies are poised to invade the three main countries of the mainland. The Khadorans, Sakovans, and Fakarans are badly outnumbered as a thousand huge warships set sail from the Island of Darkness to exterminate all life on the mainland. Led by an ageless mage, the forces of evil appeared assured of success.

The Torak, the Star of Sakova, and the Astor rally their forces to meet the onslaught and preserve humanity, but can their outnumbered forces stave off the murderous rampage that is about to descend upon them?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Alcea Collection

The Alcea Collection consists of three series. The Targa Trilogy is the beginning of an epic fantasy adventure centered around a boy destined to become the ultimate warrior and a girl whose magic will shape the future.

The Alcea Collection continues with a seven volume series, the Sword of Heavens. The Sword of

Heavens presents the next generation of heroes as five emerging adults are thrust into a world of darkness, treachery, and deceit. Only the efforts of these young heroes can change the destiny of the world and restore the heavens above the Darkness.

Demonstone Chronicles is the third series in the Alcea Collection. Alutar, the Great Demon, has made plans against the defeat of his Chosen One, and he rallies an entire continent to destroy Alcea.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Targa Trilogy

Prepare for a journey into a world of might and magic, elves and dwarves, goblins and yaki, a realm where three human youngsters are thrust into saving their world from an evil magician bent on destruction. Discover parallel universes and the mystery of the origins of the races.

The son of a humble lumberman, an orphaned girl abandoned into the care of an old sick man, and the cunning son of a border guard are the only people to stand in the way of the destruction of all that people cherish and love. The Targa Trilogy details the trials and perils of Alexander, Jenneva, and Oscar as these special, gifted young Targans take on the diabolical Sarac and his minions.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Origin Scroll

Origin Scroll starts the series with three 15-year-olds who are thrust onto the world stage as the only hope to stop the evil Sarac.

Alexander is burdened with saving his village from an attack of yaki, while Jenneva enters a cave that will change her life. Oscar, a boy with no future in a small border town, learns the truth meaning of persuasion.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dark Quest

Dark Quest, the second volume, finds our young heroes challenged by Mordac, Sarac's assistant. Mordac unveils a plan to capture the knowledge of the world in his bid to restore his master, Sarac.

His plans include pitting the nations of the world against one another to prepare for the destruction he knows Sarac will unleash.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ancient Prophecy

Ancient Prophecy, the third and final volume in the series, forces our fearless trio to face a renewed and more powerful foe as Sarac is given new powers by the demon Alutar.

Alex and Jenneva travel to another Universe to learn the secrets of the origin of the races only to discover that they cannot return.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Sword of Heavens

A generation after the end of the Targa Trilogy, in a land of fear and darkness, the Children of the Prophecy gather to either flee from the terror of the Dark One or to dedicate their lives to overthrowing him. They are the world's only hope of returning the land to the light, but the odds are so overwhelmingly against them that their chances of success are ignored, yet can they really succeed against thousands of evil beings dedicated to their destruction? The Sword of Heavens, an ancient artifact of awesome power, has been stripped of its magical gems and the Children are the only ones who can restore it, but in a land without law or order, who can they trust?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Sapphire of the Fairies

The sky is dark. Neither the sun nor the moon have been seen in decades. The land is fruitless, and the seas are barren. No law exists, only the rule of might is exerted over a hapless people by those who can wield it. In a land of darkness and despair, there is one shining light, an ancient prophecy that foretells of the coming king and his companion, the vanquisher of evil.

Sapphire of the Fairies is the first of seven volumes of the epic fantasy series Sword of Heavens. Explore a vast continent where elves, dwarves, unicorns, fairies, demons, dragons, and man all exist. Sapphire of the Fairies begins the saga of five humans on the verge of adulthood. Living in a land where no one can be trusted, these five adventurers must restore the magical Sword of Heavens and defeat the Evil One, an evil sorcery whose minions roam the world in an attempt to defeat the ancient prophecy.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Unicorns' Opal

Unicorns' Opal begins where Sapphire of the Fairies left off. Placing the Sapphire of the Fairies in the Sword of Heavens cleared the skies over Cordonia. The the end of the Darkness in that part of the world has alerted Sarac to the location of the Children and his evil minions are converging on the Rangers.

The Sword of Heavens has pointed the way to the Unicorns' Opal, but the Children must stay one step

ahead of the forces of evil to complete their task.

Follow the adventure of the Children of the Ancient Prophecy as confusion, doubt, and betrayal infiltrate their ranks and threaten to bring an end to the hopes of the world

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Abuud: the One-Eyed God

While the Children of the Ancient Prophecy seek the Diamond of Edona, the Dark One's forces are mobilizing to preserve his evil grip on the world. Goblins are massed to begin the campaign of destroying those pledged to the heir. In Tagaret, the Contest of Power threatens to prevent the heir from assuming the throne of Alcea. Meanwhile, a death squad, called Sarac's Ravens, is sent out to destroy Alex, Jenneva, and the heir. Unwittingly helping Sarac, is a prophet for the god Abuud, who feels destined to control the world.

The search for the Diamond of Edona suddenly becomes deadlier as the Children are split up by multiple threats. Follow the adventure of the Children of the Ancient Prophecy as the mysterious Master Khatama, the charismatic prophet Azmet, and the unseen Stafa Rakech take part in molding the Ancient Prophecy towards their desired goals.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dwarven Ruby

Before the Prince of Alcea can secure the Dwarven Ruby for the Sword of Heavens, he must first find an ancient magical shield created by dwarven magicians eons ago. The shield was carried into battle against the goblins, but the dwarves that carried it have never been heard from again. Meanwhile, the mysteriously senile Mage entices some of the Children of the Ancient Prophecy to join him in what may be a suicide attack of the Imperial Palace of Emperor Hanchi.

The Contest of Power reaches a critical stage in Tagaret, and gypsy rebels must determine what the Ancient Prophecy means to them. Discover a world of might, magic, and intrigue as the search for the fourth gem of the Sword of Heavens brings danger to a new level.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Emerald of the Elves

Although Queen Marta has secured the throne in Tagaret, the city is still not safe for Prince Arik. Remnants of the Council still seek to end the monarchy, and the city is riddled with agents of the Dark One. Even though it has long been expected, the march northward of the army of Lanoir sends shivers down the spines of everyone paying attention. As the forces of Abuud, Sarac, and Emperor Hanchi begin to converge on Tagaret, Prince Arik is forced to make a giant step towards his destiny to rule Alcea.

Sarac's Ravens continue to track the Alcea Rangers and battle with them becomes assured. The search for the Emerald of the Elves is complicated by an elven queen who does not wish the Ancient Prophecy to be completed, and a failure of the Sword of Heavens to locate the gem. The quest to fulfill the Ancient Prophecy becomes more dangerous than ever as the battles begin to take their toll on the Alcea Rangers.

Meanwhile, the Mage discovers the shocking truth about the Darkness, a truth so unthinkable that it makes the rule of Sarac almost desirable. Delve into an adventure that is rife with danger, magic, deceit, and betrayal.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dragons' Onyx

The Castle of Man, a huge towering castle that straddles an important mountain pass to the north of Tagaret, is besieged by ogres, goblins, yakis, and dark sorcerers. If it falls, the armies of the Dark One will descend on Tagaret to end the Ancient Prophecy. Far to the south of Tagaret, Emperor Hanchi and his hundred-thousand man army is moving northward, destroying everything in its path.

Caught in the middle are King Arik and his Alceans. As King Arik struggles to find the Dragons' Onyx and restore it to the Sword of Heavens, his small band of heroes must battle against these two huge armies to save Tagaret from destruction.

Meanwhile, Master Khatama is gathering a mysterious group of master magicians that appears bent on threatening the Ancient Prophecy. The stakes in the war of good versus evil have never been higher. The fate of the world rests in the hands of a small group of warriors known as the Knights of Alcea.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Amethyst of the Gods

A hundred-thousand man Lanoirian army is poised outside the walls of Melbin in a bid to attack Alcea from the south. Meanwhile an enormous army of goblins, yaki, ogres, and Black Devils are heading towards Tagaret, the capital of Alcea, from the north. King Arik and his Alcea Knights must defeat these two armies to complete the Ancient Prophecy.

The immortal Mage has gathered six of the world's greatest magicians to embark upon a mysterious mission that appears to be at odds with King Arik's fulfillment of the prophecy.

The stakes have never been higher, nor the situation ever so dire. Amethyst of the Gods is the final volume of the Sword of Heavens series.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Demonstone Chronicles

For years the Darkness shrouded the world causing fields to wither and die. Forest growth halted and animal life grew scarce and lean. The bounty of the sea diminished to the point where fishermen had trouble feeding their families. To add to the misery of the peoples of the world, rogue armies took control of the lands as governments fell and perished. Banditry ran rampant and people kept to their homes in fear of their lives.

Out of this era of desperation and misery arose the son of a fisherman, a seemingly simple lad born in a small village on the coast of Sordoa, but the future of the world had been waiting for him. After seventeen years of being a fisherman's only son, Arik Clava was thrust into a world of danger and set on a perilous quest to destroy the Darkness. Accompanied by others his own age, and guided by a strange pair of gypsies, Arik would grow into the Warrior King, and his companions would become the Knights of Alcea.

Arik was given the Sword of Heavens, a magical artifact that would vanquish a portion of the Darkness with each gem restored to its hilt, but the gems did not come easy. The Knights of Alcea were constantly hunted by the minions of Sarac, an evil mage with vast powers, but each gem also brought new allies sworn to the boy king. Fairies, unicorns, dwarves, elves, and even dragons eventually swore allegiance to Arik, but Sarac's forces were even greater in number. Huge armies of men, goblins, ogres, and yaki swarmed over the land to prevent the boy king from fulfilling the ancient prophecy. As the great armies of Sarac swept across the continent, the fragile land was further beaten down until food became a precious commodity.

In the end, King Arik and the Knights of Alcea won the day. All of the land was united under the banner of the Warrior King, and the evil Sarac and his minions were destroyed, but the cost was great. The land was barren and bloodstained. Fishermen had no boats, and farmers lacked implements to coax life into the soil. Tradesmen had no shops, and merchants had nothing to sell. It seemed as though the only profession with a steady stream of customers were the healers, and they had more than they could handle.

For three years the people of Alcea toiled to reclaim their lives, and many were well on the way to recovery, but others were not. While peace reigned over the land, and the skies were no longer tainted by the Darkness, many people were lured to a new religion. The Temples of Balmak began to appear, and the priests offered a vision of paradise that proved tempting to many. It didn't matter to those who sought refuge from misery that Balmak was an unknown god. What mattered to them was the thin sliver of hope for a better existence.

In Tagaret, the capital of Alcea, King Arik and Queen Tanya worked tirelessly to rebuild the kingdom. Prince Oscar's vast fortune was spent trying to help the provinces get back on their feet, but even he did not have enough gold to cure all of the ills of the devastated kingdom.

The Knights of Alcea did not disband, but neither did they still exist as a group. Each Knight went his own way, trying to rebuild his life after years of continuous battle. Wylan and Sheri moved to Southland, the boyhood home of Wylan. Tedi and Natia spent all their time with the gypsies, and Alexander and Jenneva retired to Atar's Cove. Prince Garong returned to the elves of Elderal, and Prince Darok settled back into the dwarven caves of Lanto. Bin-lu returned home to Lanoir. Only Fredrik and Niki remained in Tagaret with the king and queen. Fredrik was appointed the Royal Sorcerer, and his wife, Niki, became his assistant.

Little did anyone know that storm clouds were massing on the horizon, and that the hard years of rebuilding Alcea were about to look like a short interlude of peace between great wars.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Knights of Alcea

They do not wear shining armor, nor do they carry colorful banners. Their names are unknown to the average citizen, but their commands carry weight over all but the king. They are the world's masters in warfare and magic. They are the Knights of Alcea.

The days of warfare and Darkness were supposedly over, and the Knights of Alcea had scattered across the huge nation, returning to their private lives, their services no longer required. Unknown to them, a storm is rising over the horizon. When seemingly senseless acts of violence erupt across the breadth of Alcea, the Knights of Alcea are drawn back into action, but their enemies are shrouded in secrecy as they move forward with a diabolical plan designed to crush Alcea forever.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Final Voyage of the Remora

Compelled to journey to an unknown land and spy on mysterious enemies, Alexander Tork assembles a small but deadly force for a voyage that may well be his last. Five Knights of Alcea, three Rangers, and three elves from Glendor set sail on a stolen enemy ship through uncharted waters to the homeland of the followers of Balmak. Guided only by a crude coastline chart found on the stolen ship, the Alceans find a vast continent that is preparing for global war.

Journey to Zara with the Knights of Alcea as they discover strange new magics and encounter an empire that seeks to plunge the world into misery and despair.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Council of War

The Remora has sunk, and there is no way for the Alceans to return home before war breaks out. Stranded in the land of their enemy, seventeen Alceans set out to bring a quarter of a million enemy soldiers to their knees.

Alexander Tork poses as Garth Shado, a special agent for a wealthy Tyronian merchant. To plot the destruction of his enemy, he makes alliances with all of the enemies of the Federation, but the real task will be in pulling the coalition together and coordinating the diverse forces under his command.

Time is short and many of his new allies balk at Garth's efforts to create a Council of War. The fate of Alcea rests with the ability of the small group of Alceans to inflict damage on the Federation and obtain information on the attack plans of the enemy. Only a Council of War can ease the flow of soldiers set to attack Alcea.

—The Demonstone Chronicles continues. Look for the next release soon—

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

About the Author

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Making the transition from President of a computer consulting firm servicing Fortune 500 companies to the reclusive life of creating new worlds is not as difficult a task as one would imagine. Both require organization, patience, and a vision of what is possible.

Richard S. Tuttle accomplishes this transition in a dramatic way with the release of twenty-one novels dealing with three entirely created worlds. The Forgotten Legacy Series evolves around a continent comprised of three countries with widely diverse cultures.

The Targa Trilogy, Sword of Heavens series, and the Demonstone Chronicles deal not only with a diverse world, but widely varied universes as well. His ability to create a believable world and unique characters is already drawing a following of readers that will make Richard S. Tuttle a household name.

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