

Chapter One

A broad shouldered, well built man, sat down on a small stool in front of a fold out desk. Across the desk were a series of maps of the surrounding area with a few mugs of ale holding down the corners. The man stroked his curly beard as he looked upon the three other men sitting down across the desk from himself.

“They will most likely believe us to be marching directly for Port Gast and will therefore try a direct assault,” said Commander Vance. He pondered on that thought for a moment before adding, “We will split the force in two and when they come for us here,” as he pointed at some clear ground near Port Gast, “we will trap them between our two forces but leave them a small gap in which to retreat.”

“If I may sir, why are you going to allow them space to retreat?” Questioned General Everard.

“A fighting force with no hope of retreat will fight for their lives with an increased tenacity Evan. That’s why it will save us both time and men if we allow them the opportunity to retreat,” replied Commander Vance.

“Of course Sir. Very sorry Sir. I should’ve realised that Sir,” added Evan rather too hastily.

He liked Evan Everard. In a way he reminded him of him when he was newly promoted to General and had his

first war council to attend. He had been 19 years of age then, the youngest General that Andris, or for that matter the rest of Oberin, had ever witnessed. He'd been offered the promotion after successfully breaking the siege of Andris. He remembered it well.

He had been left in Andris whilst the army went on a campaign to secure the lands around Port Gast for the first time in order to protect our trading interests from those of Mirith. Unfortunately the army had been caught unawares just West of Port Gast and had been destroyed along with several hundred which were taken prisoner. The Mirith army split and a small force was sent to Andris to negotiate the peace treaty and the surrender of Andris. He and his men prepared for a siege and had, at great cost to both sides, defended the city for ten weeks. However, they had begun to run desperately short of food and had been forced to feed off dead horses and rats. It was then that, as the highest ranking officer left in Andris, Regan Vance had taken the decision to attempt to break the siege. He led a small party through the sewers, dressed in the blue of Mirith and snuck into the enemy camp. He and his men, numbering no more than twenty, managed to cut the picket ropes and send chaos through the enemy camp. Horses ran everywhere as supplies were set on fire and thousands of sleeping Mirithian soldiers were trampled to death. Of the twenty men that left Andris, only two men returned, himself and an old soldier named Kirst Topling. The man had died a few weeks later as a result of an argument over gambling debts and it was now only he himself who remembered the faces. The faces of all those soldiers burning...and being trampled to death. Regan let out a sigh. He had grown up in Mirith and had rather liked the place...and the people.

Commander Vance stood and signaled for his squire. The little boy came bouncing eagerly across the floor of the tent to collect up the maps and documents that lay spread across the desk.

“Thank you Jared. Now, if you men will excuse me, I have matters to see to around the camp.”

The other men in the tent gave their salute and passed out of the exit into the sprawl of the camp. He followed them out and took a deep breath of fresh air. His men were camped in an organised fashion, with each squad camped around their own fire. Regan walked through the camp and pulled on his gauntlets as he gave an appreciate nod to the soldiers he passed. He was fully aware that most of the men he commanded had seen a good few more winters than he had but he tried not to let that bother him too much. He wasn't sure if it bothered the soldiers, some seemed content to get on with their job whoever was in command, others seemed to look up to him but there were always those that sneered at him and his lofty status at the age of 23. He reached the edge of the camp and waited as three mounted men came trotting up the hill towards himself.

‘Only three,’ he thought to himself. He knew something was wrong already, he didn't need the scouts report to know that.

“Mirith...men...all over the...ridge,” said the first man as he fell from his saddle.

Two soldiers with a stretcher hurried along and picked up the injured man as Regan looked upon the other two men. The man sitting slouched on his chestnut horse had taken an arrow under the shoulder but the other man sat upon his horse as if nothing had happened, even his hair seemed unflustered.

“Get yourself to the infirmary young man and get that seen to,” commanded Regan. ‘He won’t live long,’ he thought to himself.

“Yes sir,” mumbled the man as he led his horse away.

Regan looked upon the remaining man. He was the most skilled horseman Regan had ever known and had taught Regan a lot of what he knew about tracking and survival in the forests of Oberin.

“Austin, need I have to ask?” questioned Regan.

“Ah. Well Sir. I picked up a trail as the men were too busy cooking a spot of lunch and I took these,” he paused for a moment as he looked around, “...those two men with me to investigate. Before I know it the trail took me around back to our own bloody camp! Only it was quiet. If you get my meaning.”

Regan nodded. ‘Those cursed bloody wizards! I’ll have their guts for garters!’ he thought to himself as he clenched his fists.

“How long?”

“They’ll attack within the hour. I suggest we withdraw, they must outnumber us by four to one, plus they’ve just taken us by surprise...or as goo-” replied Austin.

Before he had finished, a storm of arrows flew from the nearest forest towards himself.

“Men! To arms!” thundered Regan as he blocked three arrows with his shield. Hundreds of arrows were raining death down upon his men now.

“We fight,” spat Regan as he glanced at Austin. “And for gods sake man put some armour on! Just because you’ve cheated death half a dozen times doesn’t mean your invincible!”

“I guess I can find a helmet from one of the men that

won't be needing it," replied Austin with a slight sneer.

"Rally to me!" shouted Regan once more but his men were already beginning to flee. As suddenly as the arrows had rained upon them a great blue tide swept towards them.

He caught his squire, Jared, out of the corner of his eye as he was struggling to reach him with his horse. Grown men were fleeing but this little boy was trying to do his best to help his Commander. Regan almost laughed. 'I would've run away with the others,' he thought. Jared was no more than twenty paces from Regan now as two Mirithian soldiers stepped out in front of the boy.

"Pissing yourself little girl?" laughed one of the men as Jared froze where he was and fumbled for his sword. Regan cursed and ran over the fallen bodies of his comrades to reach his Squire.

"I think we'll skin -" said the other man as a steel tongue six inches long crept out from his mouth and Regan pulled his sword away before the other man had time to react. He swung his sword in an arc and landed it in the neck of the other man as blood splattered across his face and dripped into his beard. The man fell to the floor clutching his throat as his body convulsed.

"Take the horse Jared, ride back to Andris and tell them to speed up the construction of the gate tower...and tell them to get one o' those bloody priests to put some sort of spell on it...and tell my mother I failed her again and that I'm sorry,' blabbered Regan quickly as he let in a deep breath.

"But...Sir my place is with you..." replied Jared.

"It's not anymore. That's a command."

"Yes Sir. I understand Sir. Very good,"

"Just go!" shouted Regan as he turned and continued

on foot into the bloody mess.

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General Devinside approached the Commander's tent, saluted the two guards who stood at either side with their hand rested on their sword hilt and brushed aside the tent flap to the entrance.

"Please, come in General, we've been expecting you," said Commander Fenwick with a slight smirk.

Griff Devinside made his way to the stool set out in front of the two men. He didn't like either man very much. The Commander was a good man but he was clearly incompetent. It was the man on his left which pulled the strings, Griff was pretty sure. He had never been the brightest of lads but it didn't take a mighty intellect to work that much out. The man on his left was what the King called his 'Wizards'. The fact was the rest of the world called them 'Black Wizards' and Griff could see why. The man had slicked black hair and dark eyes which unnerved Griff more than anything else.

"We found the camp exactly where you said," stated Griff as the wizard let out a broad smile. "We killed them to a man but from what we could tell a few men were out on patrol when we attacked."

"Do you think they would've made it back in time?" asked Fenwick.

"Possibly, I set a squad of men to track them down and kill them if they caught sight of them. Either way, they'll have little warning thanks to...you knowing what they're planning," answered Griff as he let out a sigh. He really didn't like this witchcraft business. Mirith had the superior army so Griff really didn't see any need for

these...wizards.

“Very good!” exclaimed Fenwick as he clasped his hands together. “Have the first wave ready to attack on my command. You will lead the Vanguard in the first wave of the attack, after our archers have wreaked havoc. Understood?”

“Yes Sir,” replied Griff. He saluted and turned towards the tent exit and lifted the flap once again and looked out upon the sprawl of the camp. Most of the camp was empty now and the men were waiting in position ready for the command to attack. He always felt nervous before going into battle but once the steel had begun to clash adrenaline took over and everything was just a blur. He had only just turned 24 and he really didn’t want to die so young. ‘Why didn’t I just become a blacksmith or something?’ he thought to himself. He knew why, he was the Grandson of the famous Dirk Devinside and he had little choice in the matter and he’d been trained for War since before he could remember. ‘Still, a blacksmith wouldn’t have been so bad,’ he thought to himself.

He walked towards the ridge where the men were being positioned and he cast a glance along the crest of the hill towards the Lizardmen. The Lizardmen unnerved him almost as much as the black wizards did. Mirith had been at war with the Lizardmen in the past but now they were the staunchest of allies. It was funny how things changed from your childhood, then he would’ve been encouraged to rip the Lizardman’s heart out but here they were fighting side by side. Fighting side by side they might have been but Griff certainly didn’t trust the Lizardmen, and he imagined the same went for their trust of the humans. He put on his helmet and fastened his gauntlets.

“Archers! On my signal!” shouted Griff before he

paused for a second. "Fire! The sky suddenly darkened with the shafts of thousands of arrows raining death down upon the enemy camp. "Fire!" Once again shafts thundered towards the enemy camp as horns sounded from beyond the ridge. "Vanguard, with me!" Griff started walking towards the ridge, expecting to witness the Andrisian's to come charging. What he saw was a camp in disarray and men running left, right and centre. Pockets of men were standing strong but certainly not enough to stand in their way. 'We might not even need to send in the rest of the army,' thought Griff to himself. "Charge!"

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Regan was surrounded by six or seven Mirithian soldiers, all older than he. He gripped his shield tight and adjusted the hold on his sword. The soldiers wearily edged closer towards Regan, clearly recognising how deadly Regan was with his blade.

"What's wrong little boy? Waiting for your mother so you can suckle on her breast?" Said one of the soldiers as he sneered in contempt at the well armored Commander.

Regan focused intently on the men that surrounded him, ignoring the taunts of the soldiers.

"I've had enough of this dilly dallying around," exclaimed one of the soldiers as he stepped towards Regan. Regan span and took a step toward the man as he feinted with his sword and rammed the edge of his shield at the throat of his opponent. The man stumbled back into the circle surrounding Regan. This was hopeless, Regan knew, eventually they would call come at him together and he would be cut down.

"Commander! Commander!" shouted Evan as he cut

his way toward Regan.

“No Evan! Get out of here, the battle is lost!”
responded Regan.

Evan Everard continued toward the Commander and Regan saw his chance to escape the men as they were distracted. He charged with his shield at the stunned man from before and knocked him clean of his feet. He stumbled away, hacking and slashing at anything that got in his way, and more often than not, those that didn't as well. Regan glanced around trying to find the face of Evan amongst the many men littering the field. He found him easily enough, on the end of a spear being thrust triumphantly in the air. Regan's heart sank, he wondered if anyone one he knew had managed to make it out of the massacre with their vital organs intact.

Regan picked up the reins of the nearest horse and pulled himself up into the saddle. The battle was lost, that was clear for anyone to see and his only interest now was trying to make it out of this mess alive. Just as he was about to ride away a spear struck him under the shoulder and he was catapulted from the saddle, such was the force. As he fell the spear snapped and he lay on his back at the vultures circling above the battlefield. He winced at the pain and let out a cry as he got to his feet. In that moment he almost wished he hadn't as he looked upon several Lizardmen, all standing in a circle around him.

“What'ssssss thisssss?” hissed one of the Lizardmen.

“The enemy Commander,” slurred another of the foul beasts.

“I like the tassssste of them onesssss,” hissed the first one again.

Regan drew his sword from his scabbard and stumbled to the side as he struggled to keep his balance.

This was no good he knew. If these were Mirithians he might just be taken prisoner, but he knew the Lizardmen would rather mutilate him. The clash of steel was still sounding from the battlefield and a group of Andrisians came upon the Lizardmen. The Lizardmen were far quicker than they appeared and the men were cut down with relative ease. A few Lizardmen had fallen though. Regan looked around, just three left. 'Perhaps' he thought to himself.

Regan let out an almighty scream as he charged one of the Lizardmen and took them by surprise. He stumbled into him with his sword extended as it slid through the soft underbelly of the Lizardman. He turned on his heels and used his sword as a walking stick to keep his balance. The other two approached him more cautiously as Regan was fumbling around with his gauntlets. He removed a small throwing knife and let fly. It took the Lizardman in the belly as he gave out a hiss and they both ran toward Regan with spears raised. Suddenly one of the Lizardmen fell, a spear through his back. The remaining Lizardman attacked Regan. They wrestled each other on the floor and the Lizardman hissed and tried to bite Regan as they struggled on. Regan was fighting a losing battle he knew, his strength was fading as the blood drained out through his shoulder wound.

Suddenly the struggling stopped. The eyes of the Lizardman were still and life taken from him. As he hefted the heavy body from him, he saw a man, well armoured and obviously of high ranking. Only he was wearing blue.

"Get up you great oaf, you never were much use with that sword," uttered the man in blue.

"Griff?" replied Regan in disbelief. "They put you in the Vanguard, ha!"

“Oh very funny, get up on that horse before I have to kill more Lizardmen for you.”

Regan got to his feet and pulled himself up onto the saddle as Griff slapped the hind of the animal and it sped off away from the fighting.

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The walls of the building were damp and the only light came from a lamp suspended above the heads of the two men in the room. The lamp flickered as another man entered the room from the far side and sat down opposite the two men. The new man wore a hooded cloak which he didn't remove but the other two men wore nothing over their heads. The hooded man looked upon the faces of the two men sat opposite with him but to his horror he couldn't seem to focus on their faces, all he saw was a swirl of movement, unfocused and confusing. He looked away.

“Prince of Mirith.” said the man with the hooded cloak, such was the custom. You spoke nothing else apart from the name of the target and then a simple yes or no.

“Seven hundred and fifty thousand gold pieces,” answered the man on the left.

“Yes.”

“Half payment now, half on completion,” said other the man in a high pitched voice, certainly not his own the hooded man wagered. He knew sorcery as well as the next man, but he was forbidden to use any here.

“Yes,” replied the hooded man again as he placed the chest on the table. They didn't check it, they knew no man would cheat them, not if he valued his life.

The two men said nothing more as they started at the

hooded man. He knew this was his cue to leave and so he stood up and made for the exit, keeping his head lowered to try and hide his identity. It was pointless he knew, they would have some sorcerer looking in on the whole transaction but he felt a sense of security in pretending there wasn't.

As he stepped outside he looked toward the sky. 'What a crap day,' he thought to himself. The thought of the young boy dead and the King being humbled by the Lizardmen soon brought a smile to his lips. The all powerful Mirithian royalty bowed to its knees in one swift movement, calculated to perfection. It was almost enough to make the hooded man laugh. Almost.