

Rogues of the Black Fury

A Novel By

*Travis Heermann*

Email: [travis@travisheermann.com](mailto:travis@travisheermann.com)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/travis.heermann>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/#!/TravisHeermann>

Web: [www.travisheermann.com](http://www.travisheermann.com)

Blog: [www.travisheermann.com/blog/](http://www.travisheermann.com/blog/)

Rogues of the Black Fury Podcast: [www.travisheermann.com/rogues/](http://www.travisheermann.com/rogues/)

For Mom and Dad

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## Chapter 1

Javin Wollstone stood gripping the balustrade of the mezzanine box, shoulders tense, a hundred thoughts flicking through his mind, surveying the thickening crowd of commoners below. Did he load his pistol properly? Were all of the Blue Dragons in their proper positions? Were there any Farthi in the crowd? In the glow of the dim stage lights, it was difficult to see. A dozen low-born faces, a score, a hundred, milling and mingling, two hundred, difficult to remember them all—

A soft hand fell on his forearm, startling him. Bella flinched away. “For heaven’s sake, sit down, brother,” she said. “If you stand there like a statue, I’ll never be able to enjoy the play.”

Javin took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, willing his shoulders to relax and his aching hands to release the balustrade. “It’s my task to protect you.”

Bella laughed. “No one will harm us here. We are surrounded by friends and countrymen, and your men are everywhere. Now, sit.”

Javin released his breath and acquiesced, but a line of tension between his shoulder blades still felt like a drawn leaf spring.

Bella giggled and bounced in her chair, allowing her enthusiasm free rein. “Look around! Isn’t this wonderful? Isn’t it akin to living a dream?”

For the first time since entering the theater box, Javin took a long look at his sister. Living a dream. His dreams of late were no place to live. Nevertheless, he lived them, every night, over and over, with the blast of cannons and the screams of his dying men, the stench of powder and blood and spilled viscera, faces of the enemy, faces of his men, his comrades, twisted, bloody, cleft, shattered, empty of life and courage. Bella did

not know. No one knew. No one would ever know the torture of his dreams. He found himself rubbing the patch of numbness on his scalp where a flap had been nearly sliced away by a Farthi blade. Hair covered the scar now, but he could still feel the numb fleshy ridge.

Javin gripped the rail again and spoke slowly, “I enjoy the theater, but not as much as you.” He turned back toward the crowd. The building murmur filled the space. “It’s all I can do to keep you from going every single night.”

Bella’s mouth dropped open. “So you’re plotting against me?”

“At Father’s request, of course.”

She sniffed. “I no longer need a nursemaid.”

He smiled and spoke to her as if she were still eight years old. “Of course, Sister.”

She punched him on the shoulder.

Javin enjoyed teasing her, but their father was quite serious. The Grand General wanted his daughter to be seen by the masses, but not too often. She was so popular with the commoners, it was best to keep her as a rarefied delicacy than a daily staple. Her beauty—not to mention her family name—would make her the object of many a suitor, and perhaps more than a few unwelcome admirers.

Javin surveyed the gallery again. When he had returned to Norgard after the war halted, Bella’s endless effervescence had pulled him back from the brink of endless black moods. On the other hand, she distracted him from his task at times like this, when they were most vulnerable.

The two bodyguards standing behind Javin and Bella in their special box on the mezzanine could have been twins in their dark blue woolen uniforms, similar to Javin’s own. The mezzanine box was, of course, the best in the playhouse, with a commanding central view of the stage, hanging high above the gallery.

Javin caught a whiff of the unwashed bodies below, all of them warm and moistened from this evening’s steady rain. He wrinkled his nose. Why they could not bathe more often, he would never understand.

The building rattled with the crash of thunder and the patter of rain driving against the tile roof above, like phantom applause before the show started.

Bella wore her favorite gown, pink and ivory-sequined, commissioned by their mother just before her death. Bella was beginning to outgrow it now and stretch it in

womanly ways, much to Javin's protective consternation.

She favored him with a radiant smile. "I've heard this play is even more wonderful than *The King's Three Daughters*."

"How do you know that? I understood that this is the first performance."

"You have your spies, and I have mine." She giggled.

"Master Filton has some skill with a quill, I must say. Such a terrible thing to watch a poor old man betrayed by his children in that last one."

"But it all ended well, didn't it."

"The ending was too happy. The king forgave them too easily, after they had stolen his throne and left him to starve in the Red Waste."

"Ah, but we must have a happy ending. Forgiveness is a virtue, Javin. Don't you agree?"

He sighed, noting the other nobles and wealthy merchants ensconced in the other mezzanine boxes. "Of course, you're right."

"We must even forgive our enemies someday."

He took a drink of his wine, saying nothing. She was so innocent. How could she know that he could never forgive the Farthi? Images crowded his mind again: the stench of battle, the thunder of his heartbeat, louder than the cannons, louder than the screams of dying men, the feeling of his bowels turning to water, his hands shaking so badly he could not even hold his pistol steady, the relentless onslaught of men so willing to die for their Prophets. And not just men. He still remembered the way his sword blade had grated between the ribs of a Farthi boy little older than Bella. Why must such pain never be more than half a thought away? He twitched and shook himself to bring his mind back to the moment.

"The best plays," she continued, "always have a happy ending, don't they."

"Yes, of course."

She slapped his arm and said with mock seriousness, "You're not listening to me. You must listen to me, or I'll pinch you."

"If you pinch me, my dear lovely sister, I shall have to tickle you until you can't breathe, and that would simply not be proper behavior for the Grand General's children." He squeezed her hand.

"You wouldn't."

“You know I would. I would embarrass you in front this entire theater.”

“Now I *know* you’re lying. You, dear brother, are too ... restrained to carry out such a hideous threat. Now, shush! It’s starting.” The innocence and unbridled joy in her gaze brought a lump into his throat. He laughed with her to make it go away. He was not so innocent as that, not anymore, and he could not bear to tell her that none of this was a game, or a play.

*The Red Lily* was the finest theater in the city of Norgard. Flicking foot lanterns surrounded the polished rosewood stage. The ceiling arched into polished wooden vaults and thick dark timbers, carved and inlaid in the pre-Cataclysm style with crimson marble in the motif of intertwining red lilies.

Just as Javin scanned the crowd again, the lights in the theater dimmed, and the Master of the Performance strode to center stage. He looked like a firecock in full strut, a dazzling array of reds and oranges and yellows, with a broad-brimmed blood-red hat with a long, white plume.

His rich and sonorous voice echoed into every corner of the theater, drawing a hush over the crowd with a command few generals could muster. “My gentle companions, good evening.” He bowed deeply, doffing his hat with perfect aplomb. “Lord Javin and Lady Bella, may I offer the Grand General’s family the warmest of welcomes from His Excellency’s Men, the finest troupe of actors in all of Ostaala. My sincerest hope is that our vulgar performance tonight can serve to touch your hearts the smallest bit, if you can but lend me your ears.” His voice rose, and he made a flowing arc with a sweep of his white plume. “For tonight, my friends, is a tale like no other. Your hearts will weep and sing at the tale of Count Orlo, as he and his trusted band of heroes fend off the Farthi hordes at the Battle of Ramon Pass in the Second Century of War. A familiar tale to be sure, but Master Filton has uncovered new histories, long lost to the world”—the Master of the Performance flourished his plume again—“that will change everything you think you know about the beloved Count Orlo and his ‘faithful’ servant, Yaago.” Boos and hisses came from the audience at Yaago’s name. “But wait, my friends, and be patient but a little more. The players are ready, and the windswept crags of Ramon Pass beckon us once again, drawing us back to those fateful days. One man and a small band of heroic fighters are all that stand between the fanatical Farthi host and the gentle hills of our beloved homeland. My friends, the winds are rising, and the crags of

Ramon Pass loom above us.” Somewhere backstage, the sound of wind rose like a low moan, and the Master bowed and slipped offstage.

A peal of thunder shook the building again, and Javin jumped, instantly tense. Bella clutched his hand. The playgoers stirred at the noise, but the Master’s words and voice had done their work. Their gaze fixed upon the tall, brightly armored warrior striding onto center stage. Javin laid his hand over hers and scanned the crowd again. His ears cocked, listening for that particular sound he thought he had heard.

Unfortunately for his task, he enjoyed the plays too, making it difficult sometimes to focus on ensuring his sister’s safety. With a gesture, he sent Rulf behind him out the box to make a patrol of the mezzanine level. Rulf ghosted between the heavy curtains with barely a sound. His men were well trained and handpicked, among the best in all of Cusca. He trusted their loyalty and their prowess. Still, he noticed his hand resting on the rounded silvery hilt of his pistol holstered at his hip.

Ornamental weapons so common among nobility often were disregarded as pretty pieces of unserviceable paraphernalia. Not so, Javin’s pistol. Its fittings were inlaid with silver and gold, but all of the important parts were fashioned of fine Yarburg steel, from the specially designed barrel to the newest flintlock firing mechanism. Produced by Cusca’s finest gunsmith, the weapon was exceeded in beauty and precision only by the Grand General’s famous ivory-fitted, twin fighting pistols. The thickest Farthi armor could not stand against a leaden ball as fat as Javin’s thumb, as the heathens had discovered not so many months ago before the latest cessation of hostilities.

The performance below swept onward, with “Count Orlo” delivering rousing speeches to his beleaguered men. As a soldier, Javin felt the power of the words as Count Orlo praised the tenets of honor and courage in one breath, and railed against them the next for stealing his brothers-in-arms from him. The imminent betrayal by Yaago, Count Orlo’s closest friend and adviser, turned the audience’s heart to cold stone, and they booed and hissed the vile Yaago’s every presence on stage. Yaago’s seething soliloquies spoke of envy for Count Orlo’s exalted position and a hatred for all men so profound that he wanted nothing more than to see his compatriots suffer and die, for the sole pleasure of being witness to it. Surely, such a foul creature had never soiled the ranks of humanity before or since.



Count Orlo and his small band of men had, according to Cuscan histories, defended Ramon Pass from fifteen thousand Farthi infantry regulars and two thousand kalad cavalry. Brilliant tactics, counterattacks, and unflinching courage allowed them to hold out for a full month. They were overrun at dawn of the thirtieth day, slaughtered to a man by heathen blades, because Yaago's treachery had allowed a few Farthi assassins to steal into Count Orlo's camp during the night and kill him in his tent while that very morning, a reinforcing army of Cuscans, some ten thousand strong, marched to their aid up the other end of Ramon Pass. The Cuscan army arrived in time to halt the Farthi advance through the pass, but too late to save Orlo and his men. This was one of the tales told in the schoolrooms and at the bedsides of every Cuscan boy and girl.

However, something was wrong in the play now. Javin sat up in his seat. What was this? A lone Farthi messenger stealing into Count Orlo's tent in the dead of night? Carrying a sack? What was in the sack? Count Orlo took the sack from the Farthi, looked inside, gasped, and cast it away from him. The sack was stained with blood. Yaago crept forward from his place in the shadows and looked into the bag.

"Oh, my lord!" Yaago gasped. "It is Orman's head!"

The audience gasped.

"Aye, my son! They have killed my youngest son! How did his head come to be here?"

The stoic Farthi spoke with their detestable accent, "If you give us this pass, my lord Count, we will allow the rest of your sons and daughters to live. They will be given safe passage, never to be harmed by Farthi hands. After we have taken all of Cusca, your family will survive, and your name will live on."

Count Orlo reeled. "How can this come to pass? How could you have done this to my poor boy?"

The Farthi messenger hissed like a snake. "Farthi blades lurk in every shadow. In your cities, in your towns, in your homes, in your very beds! And our blades will not rest until all infidels have been scourged from the face of the world!"

The audience seethed. Every gaze fixed to the stage.

"Our offer is simple," the Farthi continued. "Give us this pass, and your family will live. If you choose to fight, then after we have slaughtered you and your men, taken this pass, and swept across Cuscan lands, after we have sacked your cities, stolen your

gold and silver and iron and put every living man to the sword, we will perform upon your sons and daughters horrors that would make the cruelest torturer avert his eyes.”

Count Orlo stared at the Farthi, mouth agape, his face twisted with emotion. Yaago studied his master for a long moment, then lunged forward and spat the Farthi with a wickedly barbed spear. The audience roared with surprise and approval. The Farthi suffered a long, lingering death as Yaago savaged him first with the spear, then with his sword. The audience roared with lust for blood and justice. His arm weary from the strokes, Yaago staggered to the front the stage and raised his voice in soliloquy.

“I have long hated everything my master stands for. Justice, freedom, truth. Why? Because my master loves them, of course. I need no other cause to hate. Am I jealous of his exalted position? Nay. I would not wear his boots for all the salt in the Mines of Simourne. My place is in the shadows, aye, where my best work comes to fruit. Aye, hatred belongs in the shadows, but all my sweet odium stands as nothing against my hatred for this vile sack of meat.” He gestured toward the sprawled corpse. “Shall I stand here whilst one such as this cuts the heads from children and feeds upon their flesh? Shall I stand here whilst one such as this seeds the wombs of my lord’s daughters with his vile pustulence? This wrack, this lump, this boil! Shall I stand here whilst one such as this seeks to turn my lord into a mewling coward? Nay, I say! It is by *my hand alone* that Orlo shall be reduced! By the Sun, no other! He has been my plaything far too long to relinquish him to one such as this!”

Weeping and gnashing his teeth, Count Orlo broke the soliloquy. “Oh, my son, my son! How could they have slain my boy! A child of eight summers! Alas, alas, my daughters! The Farthi mustn’t have them! Never! Never will the Farthi touch my daughters! Never will my sons feel a blade until they hold one in their own hands. Yaago! Attend me.”

“What, how now, my lord?”

“Listen upon me, for my heart can only speak this once. We must give the Farthi this pass, this worthless saddle of barren rock that has soaked far too much Cuscan blood. This pox, this useless clod that holds not one speck of worth of my boy’s blood! We must retreat, and let the Farthi come!”

“My lord, what’s this? You cannot!”

Orlo wept with bitterness, and the audience fell as silent as a tomb. Every word

resonated on the air, as clear and rich as a chorus of battle horns. “Nay, I say! We must! We must retreat. Call the captains. They’re abed now, but wake them! Wake them all and sound the retreat!”

The entire theater gasped as Yaago thrust his sword through the distraught hero’s body. “No, my lord. We cannot.”

Orlo fell back, gurgling and clutching.

Yaago watched him slowly expire. “And so a hero dies, and a hero you will remain, my lord, laid low by a filthy heathen assassin. I have given you a better death than you would have given yourself. With cowardice in heart and deed, you would have fallen under Farthi blades tomorrow and been denied at the gates to the Halls of Valor. The Holy Sons will not abide cowardice. But now, your courage still intact, you can meet us all there tomorrow, still a hero. For tomorrow, we will fight, mayhap to die, but fight we will, and none shall know that you were ready to betray us with your final breath.”

Javin’s eye caught a flutter behind him. He turned to see Rulf resuming his post two paces behind them, just inside the curtain. A shiver slithered up his neck like a snake made of ice. A bloodied blade in Rulf’s hand, long, serrated, and wickedly curved in the white-gloved fist as it flashed toward him. Javin threw himself toward Bella, both to dodge and to protect her, hand on his pistol butt, pulling it free, but his movement only saved his life, not his shoulder. Pain tore through his arm and shoulder as the blade sank into his back, its serrated edge cutting deep into the bone of his shoulder blade. Bella’s scream tore through the cavernous interior.

The other guard, Gusdan, leaped forward and drove his boot into the side of Javin’s skull. His head snapped forward and his forehead cracked against the wooden balustrade of the theater box. He slumped forward and through an exploding starry mist watched his sister’s flailing legs disappear behind the curtain. A small sound rattled from his throat, and all went black.

## Chapter 2

Grand General Janus Wollstone listened for the third time to his son's account of what happened. Morning sunlight spilled like molten gold through the windows of Tarnach Castle's audience chamber, stretching across the hardwood floors in long, warm stripes. The whitewashed walls, chased with gold paint and carven reliefs, glowed bright in the morning light. Behind him hung the sky-blue silk banner with the golden satin sun disc, benevolent rays of golden thread emanating outward in all directions, the light of the world, the symbol of Cusca.

Outside the windows, birds sang joy to the day, in stark contrast to the grim mood in the chamber. Javin stood rod straight before him alongside the generals of the other noble houses. He told the story the same way each time, and each time, his voice grew harsher, and the bitterness tightened the muscles in his jaw.

Janus stood beside his conference table on the dais with maps of Norgard spread to make his advisors feel effectual. This was not a military situation. In his heart, he cursed them all.

His daughter was gone, vanished like smoke on a moonless night. His insides were a sizzling stew of emotions, and his fists ached from being clenched so tightly for so long. It had been a long night. The city was in an uproar. Troops in the streets. Javin ambushed. The Blue Dragons, shocked and furious at their failure and betrayal, were a frenzy of indecision, and their commander, wounded and just as indecisive.

Janus could see Javin's suppressed pain in every line of his young face. His look Janus had seen on many faces through years of war. The empty, haunted look of a young man near the brink, where a thousand more deaths or a thousand more failures would not matter to him in the slightest. The last battles before the ceasefire had been brutal

for Javin, and ever since he had been little but dark and brooding. Only Bella made Javin smile these days.

Javin continued his report, a superb example of a Cuscan officer, in spite of his condition. The lad showed no sign that he had a stitched-up gash as long as a hand across his shoulder. “After I awoke, I found two guards dead on the mezzanine. Two others, Rulf and Gusdan, are missing. I believe it was Gusdan who attacked me and Rulf who snatched Bella. The guards near the stairwells saw nothing. They came at Bella’s scream, but there was no sign of her or her captors. They all simply vanished. We immediately searched the theater from top to bottom.”

Janus Wollstone shook his head and ran thick, callused fingers through his meticulously trimmed hair and beard. Even after being awake all night, his dark blue, gold-chased uniform was immaculate, gold-braid epaulets gleaming with the sapphires of House Wollstone, the Wollstone crest of a writhing blue dragon exquisitely stitched above his heart. Appearance was a skill honed and maintained by years of martial service. He looked as if he had just left his steward. That fastidious image was critical for any man who commanded one of the Great Warrior Houses, even more so for the Grand General. Even more so at a time like this.

Janus said, “No, they didn’t vanish. They simply eluded you and the other guards.”

Javin’s pale cheeks reddened.

Lord Kalis Ferrin stepped from behind Javin. “Your Excellency, if I may.” He was tall and spare, with cheekbones that made his thin face look even bonier. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he spoke, and Janus detected a sheen of sweat on the man’s narrow expanse of forehead.

“What is it, Lord Ferrin? My son was speaking.”

Lord Ferrin bowed perfunctorily toward Javin. “My apologies, Your Excellency, Lord Javin. My men have rounded up a number of individuals with known ties to Farthi interests. Our investigation is well underway. We will question every last one of them. We will find her, I swear it.”

Javin turned to Lord Ferrin, and his voice was cold as ice. “Lord Ferrin, your men couldn’t find a whore’s nethers with both hands.”

Janus suppressed a smile, in spite of his mood and the gravity of the moment. His

son still had some spirit.

Lord Ferrin blustered, but Javin squared to face him.

Javin continued, “Since the cessation of open war, Lord Ferrin, your men have degenerated into the worst kind of rabble. They spend their time drinking and whoring, when they should be maintaining their level of readiness for the next Farthi attack.”

Lord Ferrin’s face flushed red and a vein pulsed on his bony forehead.

“You do not deny it.” Javin pressed forward. “And although we appreciate your efforts to find my sister, do not think that this ... display will erase the disgrace that House Ferrin’s troops have become.”

Janus spoke. “Enough, Javin. Now is not the time for rebukes.” He fixed his gaze on each of them, in turn. “House Wollstone remembers its friends and comrades in House Ferrin. We hold our debts as dearly as our grudges. Lord Ferrin, your assistance honors us both, and I trust that your inquiries will bear fruit.”

He turned his gaze to the other eight lords standing in ranks behind Javin. All the Great Warrior Houses of Cusca assembled, with all of their power and history and prestige, at *his* command. And his little girl was missing. They had to get her back, or his fury would put a Red Waste sand-hell to shame.

Another voice rose from the ranks of the other lords. Lord Chalin Harstorm, nearly as resplendent as the Grand General in his shimmering maroon uniform and golden epaulets, stepped forward and snapped a salute. “Your Excellency, may I speak?” His clean-shaven head gleamed in the sunlight, and his snow-white beard thrust outward like a kalad’s chin spine.

Janus nodded toward him. “Lord Harstorm, please.”

Lord Harstorm’s voice was smooth and sonorous. “Your Excellency, there is something that must be considered. It is possible that your daughter and her captors are no longer within the city.”

Javin said, “But we locked down the city so quickly. How could anyone have reached the gates faster?”

“Begging my lord Javin’s pardon, but there are many ways in and out of the city. A small team of men, skilled lurkers, could spirit from the city, unseen and unheard, by any number of routes. The harbor, the Underground, a rope or ladder over the walls. Our walls have weaknesses for those who know where to look. Can you describe the

knife that wounded you again, my lord?”

Javin did so, and his gaze drew distant. Janus knew the look of a man who had an image seared on the front of his mind like a brand.

“My lords,” Lord Harstorm continued, “it sounds without question like a certain Farthi weapon.”

Lord Ferrin snorted, “Of course it sounds like a Farthi weapon! Who else would it be?”

Lord Harstorm’s gaze fixed upon Ferrin and speared him in place like a lancer spitting a straw target. “Why, my dear lord Ferrin, it could be you. It could be any one of us.”

The lords erupted in protest.

Janus allowed their protests for a few moments, then raised his hand. “Enough.” One word was all it took. “Are you suggesting, Lord Harstorm, that one of you is a traitor?” He pointedly looked around the chamber at the guards standing silent as statues near the two entrances.

Lord Harstorm stood straighter. “Your Excellency, I’m not suggesting or accusing. I’m merely stating the possibility that the kidnappers are *not* Farthi. How convenient it would be, wouldn’t it, Your Excellency, to abduct your daughter, hold her hostage, and divert our attention by making it appear to be a Farthi plot.”

Janus nodded and rubbed his beard. The thought had already occurred to him. He had wrested the title of Grand General from House Maclan, after their general had been slain in battle, then cemented his claim to the throne by prowess in battle, and by seeing to it that a multitude of glories, both real and ... embellished, were heaped upon his name. Some of the lords standing across from him were loyal friends. Some were friends of convenience. Others were power-hungry malcontents who would steal the Grand General’s position in a heartbeat if they could be sure that the other lords would not tear them to shreds afterward. Since the cessation of the war, keeping track of who were friends and enemies had become a full-time endeavor. Regrettably, it too often distracted his attention from their centuries-old enemy.

Janus raked the noblemen with his hard, blue gaze. “I’ll be damned to a thousand hells before I’ll allow Bella to end up in a Farthi chieftain’s harem.” All of them knew the horrors that awaited a Cuscan girl in a Farthi harem. “And such will be the fate of any

traitor found within Cuscan halls.”

Lord Harstorm cleared his throat. “Your Excellency, if I may continue.”

“Do go on.”

“Before I was interrupted, I said, ‘a certain Farthi weapon.’ I am speaking of a particular kind of weapon. I have four Farthi servants, all women.” Lord Harstorm stroked his beard. “I overheard them speaking to each other one night. My ear for the Farthi tongue is such that I only understood about half of which they spoke, but they were speaking of a special kind of knife like the one you describe, curved downward, with a jagged blade, something about using it for a sacrifice or maybe an offering to their Prophets.” He spat. “Those heathens are so drunk on religion it sickens me. When I asked the women about it, they shut their mouths as if moon devils were about to fall upon them.”

Janus said, “Further interrogation is in order, Lord Harstorm.”

“Of course, my lord.” Lord Harstorm bowed. “Before the sun sets, I’ll have the truth of it.”

The guards at the room’s main entrance snapped to attention as a tall, imposing figure in a deep blue uniform strode between them, shiny black boots echoing his swift sure steps across the gleaming hardwood. Janus’s elder cousin, Lord Major General Taril Wollstone, approached as if he had something to say.

“Lord Taril,” Janus said, his throat clenching with expectation. “So glad you could join us again so quickly.”

Lord Taril reached the assembled throng and snapped perfunctory bows. He bore the same imposing height and dark, rugged features that were the hallmark of House Wollstone, but he was half Janus’s weight. Dark grey circles draped under his slate-grey eyes, but his hair was perfectly slicked, his mustache immaculately teased. “Your Excellency, the bodies of four men were found in the waters of the canal, near one of the submerged grates. They all bore identical wounds. The head of each man was nearly severed by a single cut from a razor-sharp blade. The state of their corpses indicates they likely were killed during the night.”

Janus’s heart flipped over. Bella might be gone, spirited away by ... only the Sun knew. “My lords, hear me. I cannot make this clearer. Every house will muster every available man to search this city from parapet to pier, every nook and cranny, every



house, every shop, every warehouse, every stable, every sewer. If Bella and her captors are within these walls, we will find them before sunset. Every door in this city will be open to you, and if it isn't, you will smash it open. Now, go. And may Inanan guide our eyes and keep her safe."

The lords bowed, saluted, and departed, leaving Janus with his son, his cousin, and the guards. Janus barked, "All of you! Leave us!" The Blue Dragon guards marched out.

Bella's captors had been handpicked members of the Blue Dragons. He took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. If they could not trust handpicked men, whom could they trust?

"My thanks, cousin," Janus said, "for the swift discovery. You know what this means, yes?"

Javin spoke up. "It means that she is probably no longer within Norgard's walls. We must send out riders to scour the countryside."

"Aye, Son. Do that now. Waste no time. And once you have, come and find me. There's something else we must discuss."

"Of course, Father." Javin bowed and hurried out of the chamber. After he had gone, Janus turned to Taril. "Were you observing the meeting?" The walls of this audience chamber were fraught with spy holes. Every corner could be seen and heard.

Taril sniffed. "I was watching them."

"What did you see?"

Taril twisted his mustache. "I saw eight very nervous noblemen and a young man ready to fall upon his own sword for shame and anguish."

Janus nodded. "Would any of them be capable of an act such as this?"

Taril clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace. "At once, all of them. And none of them."

Janus raised an eyebrow. Taril was an astute judge of men, most of the time, and such a declaration was not welcome.

Taril continued, "All of them are ruthless, and all of them are liars. A man does not raise his house to power, and keep it, without such qualities. Other commanders within his house will remove him if he shows weakness and fails to pass on the house standard beyond his proper time, yes?"

Janus nodded. They were all military men, but they were politicians as well, and theirs was a small, incestuous circle of power. The force that united them all was the enemy of Cusca, the land of Fartha.

“Any of them have the nature to perform this deed. But they don’t have the will. Your power and prestige are at their peak. Cusca is stable and secure, and the Farthi are far away. Only a united Cusca reminds the Farthi of our power. It would be the height of lunacy for one of them to foment a power struggle among the Great Houses.”

“Perhaps one of them seeks to dent my power and prestige.”

Taril shook his head. “I think not. I watched them carefully. House Carrigan and House Maclan are not loyal, but they had nothing to hide this morning. Besides, you have their heirs as officers in the ranks of House Wollstone troops. They’ll always bear watching, but I think the truth lies with a more obvious explanation.”

“And that is?”

“I believe that Bella was kidnapped by a band of Farthi spies. For what specific purpose, I do not yet know. It was well planned, perfectly executed. And those men, the two Blue Dragons and whoever their accomplices, have either turned traitor or they have been in place among us for *years*. Were they turned somehow, or were they spies from the beginning? We cannot know until we find them. There is one more person you must meet with, an obvious choice.”

“I know. I’ve been ... saving that one for later.”

“If I have a chance to observe the Farthi ambassador while you speak with him ...”

“Aye, I know, cousin, but I fear I won’t be able to restrain myself. Something about him doesn’t sit well with me. He’s too clever by a league.”

“But he *is* tired of war and bloodshed. I’ve seen that much in him. Even if he knows nothing directly, he may offer a clue about how to find those men.”

It was good to hear Taril confirm what Janus had already guessed. It would make the news easier to break. “We need to use every available weapon.” Janus locked his gaze with Taril’s.

A parade of emotions flashed through his cousin’s eyes. “No, Janus, tell me you didn’t.”

Janus held his gaze and rested his hands upon the table.

Taril’s voice rose to a squeak, and he swallowed hard. “Tell me you didn’t.”

Another voice boomed across the room, thick and accented, like an avalanche of gravel across boot leather. “Aye, he did, Taril, you fucking fish-limp milk-breath codsucker!”

### Chapter 3

Janus suppressed a smile. Taril choked back a blustering fury and spun to face the figure stomping across the room in gleaming, hard-heeled boots. The man was like a boulder set in motion, with a thick outthrust chin, broad, prominent nose, long coal-black hair drawn into a tight ponytail at the back of his skull, three-day growth of black stubble and bushy mustache, thick-muscled forearms that swung bare at his sides to reveal the network of old and new scars, dark-knuckled hands that looked like boiled leather. Deep-set black eyes smoldered like a carefully controlled forge. This man had inspired a hundred nicknames across Cusca, all of them as infamous as the man himself.

“Commander Rusk,” said Janus, “thank you for coming.”

Taril struggled to maintain his composure.

Rusk stopped and saluted. “It took you long enough to summon me, Grand General. The news was all over the city by dawn.”

“You will address him as ‘Your Excellency’!” Taril growled through clenched teeth.

Rusk turned to face him with a mirthless grin, baring solid white teeth. “With all due respect, Taril, fuck you.” The man’s Jarls accent added even more harshness to his already harsh words. “I was commander of the First Black Fury legion and bashing in Farthi skulls while Janus Wollstone was a milk-sucking limp-cod lieutenant under General Samun Wollstone, and while you were busy trying to stick your fingers in a kalad’s hole to see what a female felt like. The Grand General is my commander, not an ‘excellency.’” He glanced at Janus and winked.

Janus’s smile almost broadened. There was no other man in Cusca with the brass

cannon balls to speak like that to the Grand General. And Taril was just about to hit the ceiling.

Taril's fists went white-knuckled at his sides, and tendons sprung from his neck. He started to vibrate.

"And furthermore," Rusk continued, poking a heavy-callused finger at Taril's face. "The next time any of your men come nosing around the Rook's Nest, I'm going to send them back without their teeth. You'll have a bunch of pus-faced codsuckers who'll have to live on gruel and water for the rest of their lives. I won't have you spying on me."

Taril sputtered, "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Hah! After we caught them, they came clean soon enough. A few hours of beer and whoring with my lads and they were like long lost friends. You never did know how to handle your own men, Taril."

Janus said, "And you, Commander Rusk, have never known how to deal with superior officers. I'll brook no more disrespect to the Lord Major General."

Rusk growled and stiffened, chomping back his next words.

"Commander Rusk, you know the situation. My daughter has been taken. We don't know where or by whom. You can well imagine that I want her back."

Rusk stood at attention. "Of, course, Grand General. I would be honored to serve. Especially if it gives me and my lads a chance to send some Farthi to meet their Prophets."

"Do you have any information?"

"Only the usual kind of rumors, nothing real. I will need a full dump of all information at your disposal." Rusk glanced pointedly at Taril, then back at Janus. "And I will need twenty thousand gold Suns. In advance."

Taril choked.

Janus's teeth clenched, and he drew back. He kept his voice low and even, with effort. "That's a year's pay for an entire regiment. You have only twenty men."

"With all due respect, Your Excellency. On the right terrain, I'll stake my twenty men against two thousand of yours, or against twenty thousand Farthi." He was not speaking in hyperbole. He stated it with the same everyday assertion that the sun would come up tomorrow. "If your daughter is alive, we will find her and bring her back. If she's dead, we will make the filthy codsuckers wish the whores who spawned 'em hadn't

spread their legs and shat ‘em out.”

“I believe you, Commander Rusk. The Black Furies have made a name for themselves. But such a sum ...”

“Your Excellency,” Rusk continued, still standing at attention, “most of the rumors blame the Farthi. Our pursuit might well take us deep into Fartha, and we will have to travel in disguise. We need equipment and supplies. Ships willing to sail into Farthi waters with Cuscan goods and passengers are few and expensive. We’ll likely have to deal with the Free Captains, and that is never cheap. This whole incident was too well planned for a few rogues and brigands. If this is a Farthi plot, they’ll have left a trail of money, a trail of witnesses to their deed, and we’ll follow that trail all the way back Al’zabh if we have to. And if we have to burn their city to the ground and gut every Priest-King to find her, we will.”

Taril cleared his throat and spoke with a voice strained as tight as a bowstring. “Your Excellency, you are not seriously—!”

Rusk growled, “When I want to hear from an arse hole, Taril, I’ll eat beans and break wind. Your Excellency, if I may be frank.”

Janus said, “Are you ever anything but?”

“Never, Your Excellency. There is no one in Cusca better suited for this task than me and my lads. The Black Furies are beholden to no Great House. My lads come from the armies of every Great House. They’ve been sitting around stroking their cods since the shooting stopped. They want to kill Farthi. Alternatively, if those who abducted her are indeed Cuscan, or Free Cities, or Red Waste savages, I’ll have no qualms about gutting the bock-fuckers as if they *were* Farthi. We are loyal to Cusca, but not to House Ferrin, House Maclan, or even House Wollstone.”

“Why you seditious—!” Taril’s voice rose. “House Wollstone *is* Cusca, you unwashed jak’l! Your Excellency, you would do well to have this ... creature clapped back in irons. He’s not even a true Cuscan.”

Rusk squared to face Taril. “Your Excellency, I’ve proven that my heart belongs to Cusca with more of my blood spilt on the battlefield than this bogtoad has in his body. And if I ever hear him speak such things *outside* the palace, I’ll make him eat his own guts.”

Janus hammered his fist onto the table, making the maps flutter like dry leaves.

“Enough!”

Rusk’s expression remained calm and steady.

“Commander Rusk, your insubordination has been your bane since the first day you ever marched a drill. Now clamp your fucking milk-hole.”

A smirk spread across Rusk’s face.

“I see I’m speaking your language now,” Janus said. “Commander Rusk, you’ll have your twenty thousand Suns.”

Rusk stood implacable.

Taril’s face grew as red as a radish. “Your Excellency! You—!”

Janus silenced him with a gesture. “But I am the Grand General, and you *will* obey me. I have one condition of my own.”

Rusk’s eyes narrowed.

“My son, Javin, will help you.”

“Begging Your Excellency’s pardon, but that is impossible.”

Janus’s cheeks grew hot and his teeth clenched. “Impossible! I can have you clapped in irons and strung up above the city gates before this hour is finished!”

“Begging Your Excellency’s pardon, you misunderstand me. My lads are not just the best. My lads are head and shoulders *better than* the best, and the reason is simple. I push them harder than any soldier has ever been pushed. And they both hate me and love me for it. My men can run for weeks at a time, without food, drink their brothers’ piss, swim across Inanan’s Belly, and gut the first fifty Farthi they meet, with a cheese knife. Your son is a respectable, reputable young man, but I don’t command respectable, reputable men. He would only slow us down. And even if he could withstand the ... unpleasantness of the training, when I get through with him, he won’t be respectable or reputable anymore. No insult intended, Your Excellency.”

“Then you shall train him until he can keep up. He is his own man. He will do what is right.”

Rusk held Janus’s gaze. “Your Excellency, that kind of training takes time, which we do not have. We must be on the heels of your daughter’s captors *tonight*.”

“Then you should begin immediately.”

“Dozens of retarded roustabouts come to me every month, thinking they have what it takes to be a Black Fury. If they pass the tests, I know they at least have enough

heart and guts to stand a chance. Five or six men out of a hundred pass the tests. The rest give up and go home. Of those who pass the tests, a handful in fifty finishes the training. And I end up with lads as tough as boiled boot leather and bound to each other like blood brothers.”

“Commander Rusk, you’ll have your twenty thousand gold Suns, but you’ll test my son. And *if* he passes those tests, he’ll accompany you to find my daughter. Whatever training he needs, you’ll give him on the way to wherever you’re going. I trust you to cut him no slack, yet be fair.”

Rusk’s jaw clenched.

“This is not negotiable. This is an order.”

“Aye, Grand General. Understood.”

“You are dismissed. You’ll have all the information we find.”

“Aye, Your Excellency.” He spun on his heel and stalked back out of the hall the way he had come.

Taril waited for Rusk’s back to disappear. “Janus, are you mad?”

Janus silenced him again, taking a kinder tone. “I’m well aware of your history with Rusk, but he’s right about several things. The Black Furies are the perfect weapon to find Bella and bringing her back safely.”

“But will she be safe from them?”

Janus could not answer that question.

“And what about Javin? You’re going to send that boy with those scoundrels?”

Janus nodded. “He’s only commanded the Blue Dragons for a few months, and I’ve watched him. I gave him that post to let him recover his wits. I thought he was ready, but I was wrong. The Blue Dragons are some of the toughest men in House Wollstone, and he is not cut to lead them. That might be one reason the kidnappers were able to succeed. Javin doesn’t know his men. His infantry unit had some success in those last few engagements before the cease-fire, but not because of his leadership. It was the sergeants’. He was lucky to survive it. I had hoped the strength of the Blue Dragons would make him a better officer, but he’s only grown worse.” Janus shook his head. “He needs to cut his teeth with a man like Rusk.”

“He’s already cut his teeth. As you said, he fought in two major engagements.”

“He’s blooded, but not yet seasoned. And he’s shaken. If something happens to



me, I don't want House Wollstone to fall from grace. There is no one else in our house who can fill this uniform." Taril stiffened as Janus touched the Grand General epaulet on one shoulder. Taril was ambitious, and clever, but he could not lead a nation or control the other Great Houses. "For House Wollstone to endure, Javin must become a better man than I. Rusk is a foul-mouthed, insubordinate bastard, but he knows well how to mold a band of fighting men and lead them. He has created a special breed of soldier, the likes of which we have never seen. Javin would do well to learn from a man like that. The men who took Bella will not see Rusk coming."

"He's more like a rabid pitwolf on a chain than a leader of men. What if he fails?"

"My daughter is already gone, might already be dead. We have nothing else to lose now before we go back to war. Rusk and his men are outsiders. Like wild pitwolves, as you say. As such, they are unpredictable, vicious ... and expendable. If the Farthi catch them, we can claim, truthfully, that they are not part of any Great House, and thus, not Cuscan. They are simply rogues, ruffians. I just need to think about how to break the news to Javin."

"He won't be pleased."

"I have little doubt that he will hate me for the rest of his days."