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MORTALS

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PROLOGUE

He was lying on his stomach. The ground and the grass were keeping him pleasantly warm even through his shabby leather armor. He was happy like a lizard enjoying the sun on a warm rock at the same time chewing his grey moustache with distinct pleasure. He was told that he always does it when something completely occupies his attention and now he definitely has something to think about. Alas, he had to be careful about other things as well. He was aware that his wolves are watching him closely, waiting for his commands.

Old man – that’s what they called him; large part of it, maybe even half, was from affection, other half was ironic, but by far largest half was out of respect. And yes, he was definitely more than a single person.

Old man – the same nickname used for His Majesty. King Illip himself had called him The Legend in front of the entire court including many of the high nobles of the kingdom. It was no wonder that he called him like that when even the king himself, as many others among them, have grown up listening to the stories about, what they liked to call them, his heroic deeds. Old man without a crown was finally in service of a present king’s father and even his grandfather.

He was old, unaware of how many summers have passed since his birth. More than seventy, it seems. Perhaps that’s why he enjoyed the heat so much. On the other hand, most of his wolves were already sweating like pigs. In spite of his old age, he could ride like any young man from his pack. He could even climb a tree easily, like a squirrel.

The spot where he was now lying had definitely enough trees to climb on, and there were squirrels, too. However, at the moment the trees were meant more for hiding from the enemies’ eyes than for anything else. They were located on the top of the quite big hill anyway, so there was no need for something even higher; they had a clear view of everything.

They could see a nice wide bay clear as day. There were two little islands slightly in front of it breaking the waves which were coming from the open sea. The islands were making the bay a natural harbor. The Ellens loved building their cities in such places, but this bay was situated too far north for them. Also, there wasn’t any human settlement anywhere nearby so the bay stayed nameless. This is going to be an issue for a report, because there was, in fact, a fleet in the bay. Anchored ships in neat rows and a flow of boats landing people, horses and equipment like a convoy of ants, and afterwards returning for reloading.

»How many of them are there, my dear little wolf?«, Old man asked a young man lying to his right.

»Twelve battle ships and sixty seven cargo ships of varying sizes, sir. Out of them ...«

»My dear little wolf, what did we say about ‘sir’« Old man interrupted him gently and corrected him like he was his grandfather. He was definitely old enough to be one and wasn’t really happy about it. Despite his good condition, old age definitely wasn’t something to look forward to. Anyway, it wasn’t for someone practicing his trade. Boy got confused so he flushed, which almost made Old man burst into giggles, but he restrained himself because of young fellow’s dignity. He was so green and such things are important to young people. Besides, he was neither more nor less than a younger son of an important northern noble and the high ranking person’s sons were, since they were toddlers, taught that they are something

special. Therefore, destroying their illusions of self-importance too soon wasn't really necessary. Each member of the pack was equally irrelevant; what is important are their actions.

General Voynuk apologized to Old man for assigning him the young fellow, but allegedly Boy himself asked for a transfer to scouts and his dad didn't want to deny it to his sons. Perhaps growing up the lad, together with his father, had heard too many stories about Old man and his pack. Since his dad was rather influential with the king, he was certainly thinking about seeing those legendary adventures at first hand.

Children. What would war do without them.

He always had complete freedom when choosing his wolves and they probably would have granted his request if he had strongly opposed their interference in his affairs. However, to be honest, he wanted to see how is the young and eager nobleman going to handle the company of ex robbers, rustlers and all kinds of half-savage members of his war band.

»Excuse me, Old man.«While he was saying this, Boy felt embarrassed. His face looked like a giant beet. However, that couldn't surprise him anymore, it was completely consistent with his character. He was eager, but peculiarly well-mannered for a nobleman, which was unusual at the same time, but also rather likeable. Anyway, so far Old man has been extremely pleased with him.

Boy was mostly his scribe, but beside that he was a good rider and knew how to use a blade.

Consequences of noble upbringing.

He noticed that immediately and double-checked it. Whoever has been his father, taking some invalid with him was something he wouldn't allow. However, at least one year will be necessary for him to be trained sufficiently by Old man and other older wolves in order to be sent for scouting on his own, with reasonable hope for safe return.

So far Boy is completely responsible for writing reports, and he has been scribbling some useful stuff – and perhaps not so useful –each time when he would follow him to some good position. Boy said that he had read in some book that scouts should do such things. The book was, of course, Ellician.

Yeah, right! Look where their books brought them.

When he saw it for the first time, Old man was grumbling a bit about that innovation, for no reason, but over time he became aware of its potential benefit. He could never think of drawing contour lines of ships. It was all Boy's idea. His memory definitely wasn't like it used to be, as if it ever had been perfect, so the things like that could have been extremely useful. He sure didn't stop grumbling, but it wasn't that often anymore. It turned to some indeterminate growling out of annoyance.

»My dear little wolf, do tell me once again, what is down there on the salt water, that even our horses refuse to drink.«

»Well, there are twelve battle ships, out of them there are ten heavy battleships with five oarsmen per oar and two patrol ships with two...per oar as well as sixty seven cargo ships.Except for the boats, there are more than a hundred of them. There aren't any small coastal ships, all cargo ships are big. Here are the sketches of the ships, s..I mean, Old man.«

Boy became silent realizing that he answered the question and that Old man, as the pack's commander, is now processing information.

Properly brought up for a nobleman.

Lost in thought he was nodding while listening to the report and still chewing his moustache. He had asked those questions several times before and always got the same answer. It took some time for him to think about the things he had seen. A reminder wasn't necessary, he wasn't that senile.

The Romea, allies of the Ellens, the whole army landing on the west coast, the king will be interested to know that.

Old man wasn't the legend for no reason. He gave the three kings much more than mere information about the enemy's arrival.

It was some time after noon and the landing started at the break of dawn. The emblems of the Seventh Romean army, a storming boar, could be clearly seen all around. He has seen them before and, to be honest, didn't miss them at all. Almost twenty years have passed since the last time they beat each other senseless.

The Romea, tough fellows, indeed, dynamic as infantry can be, strong in close combat. No one, except for the Romea has that kind of combination of skills. For this reason they represent a major power, which makes this matter extremely important and therefore, the king has to be urgently informed about it. His Majesty has to find out about the entire enemy force landing in the rear, on the coast which is totally undefended, thought Old man biting his moustache even harder.

At present, however, it was only speculation: he has seen ships, emblems, people, horses, but to confirm all that he needed a live tongue.

According to their regular patterns of behavior the Romea have already started digging field fortifications on the coast. It means that they will spend the night there and won't go any further before the next day. That certainty brought him to a particular dilemma.

Should I wait for the dark and grab a guard and then quickly question him or should I send to the king news about things I already know?

There almost weren't any doubts. After all, he is Old man. He will catch a tongue and have a complete and confirmed report for the king. But something just wasn't right.

It seemed to him that there have been too many ships for a Romea army. They have all been uniform; three hundred horsemen, one thousand two hundred light infantry, two thousand four hundred medium infantry and six hundred heavy infantry. The Romea stuck blindly to these numbers. It wasn't the first time he was sending a report about Romea army, which have been identical to these, and for some reasons, in their opinion, in perfect proportions. All right, perhaps sometimes there have been a few soldiers less than usual, but they could have been found catching a ride on a supply wagon, probably because of illness or injury. If anything could be said about the Romea, is that they were reliable about such things and there have always been four and a half thousand soldiers in one of their armies.

He wasn't an expert in ships, but it seemed to him that they were huge and therefore it looked like they were too many of them for only one army. But then again, he has seen only one kind of emblems and three hundred horses, which indicates that there is only one army.

But then again...

He turned over and looked at one of his wolves. It was Imbra, the Saka. His look was full of questions and he was seeking advice.

»Hot«, replied this one watching him with his cruel gaze.

Where do I possibly find them?

He turned away from that so called advice or it was just a comment about the weather.

You never know what this maniac is up to! When he's in the mood, he can be an excellent team player. I guess, today isn't the day.

Stamping of the horse hoofs, a horse galloping, from the back. They all heard it at the same time and jumped as one.

Orders weren't necessary.

Smart fellows.

They, even the little wolf, took a low posture until they got behind the crest of the hill.

The little wolf did well. I will have to praise him afterwards.

They drew their weapons, but only one horse could be heard. At this time it wasn't necessary for the seven of them to mount. If threat is coming from only one man, they'll deal with him easily. If it was a threat at all. The little wolf stepped forward with his drawn sword in his hand. Like he is protecting the king himself.

Charming.

Gently kicking his leg Old man gets him out of the way. »Move over, my dear little wolf, how can I wave my blade when you are in my way moving around?«

Snickering and bending his bow Imbra remarked, »For all I care, I don't mind if you keep standing in front of me«.

Normally he hated the Saks. Over the decades there have been too many of them loosing an arrow in his direction with nothing but killing intentions. A large number of them he sent to hell, whichever one of them is reserved for their kind.

However, Imbra was something else, a special kind of bastard, but the best archer and a rider Old man has ever seen and he has seen many of them.

Well yes, the difference was that Imbra was totally one of his men. The tribe cast him out because some crime which Imbra didn't want to reveal even when he was dead drunk. He has been in Old man's service for years although his salary was miserable and plunder was hardly worth the bother. He owed his life to Old man and the Saks take such things seriously and for duration of one's life.

Where do I possibly find them?

And the answer was – mostly under the gallows.

The rider was within sight. Derren, one of his better scouts. Old man had sent him and his companions before dawn to spread themselves to the left, towards south, along the coast. His anxious face said everything. Having seen a familiar person the others relaxed, but Old man gave them a hand signal so they rushed to mount their horses.

»The report!«, Old man hissed at Derren when he came galloping.

At first it seemed like he lost his soul.

»Romean cavalry, Old man«, he spat out after catching his breath. By then Old man had also mounted. »A whole bunch of them! I've managed to escape only because Enda was screaming warning me before they got him.«

»Enda. Um, so no one from the left is still alive?«, asked Old man.

Derren nodded. He was the closest left outpost scout.

»Have you seen them?«, asked Old man, but Derren shook his head. »You haven't been followed?« Derren shrugged.

He was riding too fast, there will be some evident signs for anyone who knows what to look for. Will I give an order for retreat? How can I inform the guards on the right to leave their posts?

Old man wasn't used to leave his men to the mercy of the enemy. It has been happening only in special circumstances.

And then he heard stamping of the hoofs, numerous ones, and it came from another direction than the one Derren came from. It was coming from hinterland.

We've been cut off!

They didn't wait another moment. Old man reacted immediately. He brought a horn to his mouth and started blowing forcefully. A ringing sound pierced the air. He took all of them with him at the same time and they were unexpectedly riding towards the south. He blew few more times to finish the signal for retreat and scattering. There was no longer need for being secretive. When he finished the signal, he instantly turned his pack and took them back north. He was hoping that this little trick will at least temporarily confuse their pursuers. While they were riding through the trees they were still catching glimpses of the sea and Romea camp. It looked like an ant-hill turned upside down.

Well, at least we disturbed that scum.

But soon their horsemen will also mount their horses and there will be hundreds of enemies breathing down their neck. Members of the pack could ride well and although they were in forest, they were as fast as the wind. However, they soon heard their enemies' horses and shortly after that they could also hear their pursuers' hunting cries.

Shitheads are enjoying themselves.

Old man no longer harbored illusions – they are on their trail and that even wasn't too difficult to achieve. After all, in order to pick up any real speed they had to follow the deer path. After that the Romea horn started blasting and soon could be heard continually and thus signaling their position. They were clapping spurs into their horses as hard as they could, but they gradually became desperate. Hooting of the Romea horn was getting closer and closer.

They are gaining on us! Damn their souls!

When they reached a nice wide opening, Old man realized that it was actually all in vain. He swallowed hard looking at about fifty Romea horsemen in front of them waiting quietly on their horses. There was a symbol of a rooster swaggering on their banner.

So, there were two Romea armies which landed on the west coast. It's good to know that.

The horn behind them was shrieking closer and closer.

I suppose they landed a part of their cavalry somewhere else and it was then mopping up the coast while cunning Cedonian scouts were staring at the main camp and the fleet. Cunning, I must admit, it's good to know that.

Now he needed each of his wolves to keep the enemy away for at least a minute or two. Therefore, the choice of the messenger, who was supposed to use that time, has been reduced to only one option.

»Dear little wolf, tell the king everything you saw. Remember, there are two armies!«

The youngest of the wolves didn't waste any time. He just nodded briefly and clapped spurs to his horse.

Boy really has potential.

He rushed towards east, into forest, towards mountains and then to the king and his army.

You never know, he might even succeed, Old man thought while Boy was slipping away into the trees and the thicket.

Old man drew his sword and all seven of them rushed forward to fifty of them. After a few moments the enemy also charged. A wave of black armor and horses.

It seems that the Romea cavalry fashion has changed since the last war. Their armors were mostly unpainted back then.

The Sakean arrow was loosed and it passed by Old man's ear ending in Romea in front of him. The man soundlessly fell to the ground with his war mask smashed and an arrow in his eye.

However, all others screamed. It was a high pitched scream.

One more change, they haven't done this before.

They ran smack into them. Old man let his horse right between two of them avoiding their spears. He cut the right one's hand and carried on. The Romea scream became even louder.

What the hell is wrong with them?

He passed through the first row of the Romea and then with all his strength he struck the next horseman right on his shield. He rode past the enemy who was, shaken by the intensity of that strike, trying not to fall off his horse. He came across the third one who, together with all other enemy horsemen, had a mask covering his face. It has normally been a part of Romea horsemen equipment. However, it was usually used at ceremonies and not in a battle.

One more novelty, it's good to know that. On the other hand, the Romea haven't exactly been known for innovations. What's got into them?

Using his horse the Romea got in his way so he couldn't pass by without a fight. Another Sak's arrow was loosed and it passed by Old man's ear. It ended up in a throat belonging to the Romea who had been right behind the one who was blocking Old man. However, there wasn't any time for watching the masterly archery. Old man exchanged few quick strikes with the Romea. He has already been annoyed at their screeching noise.

How do they possibly get enough air in their lungs for producing such screams?

The Romea was good, but he wasn't good enough. Old man managed to stab him with his sword. He stabbed him in the guts with the sharp point of the blade. It went in right next to his armor plate. If there had been any neutral observers nearby, they would have described it as a top of the hits. He started thinking about pulling the sword out of the Romea's body and then running into forest when he noticed that the last enemy with his drawn sword and an arrow in his throat is attacking Derren.

That wasn't the only unusual thing which happened that day at that very place. His Romea wasn't falling off the horse as he should have been falling. When he was stabbed by Old man he dropped his sword, but now he was trying to grab his neck with both his hands.

Old man was desperately spinning his sword trying to inflict sufficient amount of pain in order for him to finally let go and die. When he grabbed his neck, his hands were as strong as iron. Using his left hand Old man tried to save his neck, but he knew it was in vain.

He dropped his sword and reached for a dagger. The Romea grabbed him firmly around his throat. He knew that he only has a moment before losing consciousness and finally his life. With his last ounce of strength he stabbed the dagger into his mask and a face behind it.

As the broken mask fell to the ground, it revealed an awfully deformed human face. The scream was still continually coming from his unnaturally wide open mouth with Old man's dagger inside them. His eyes were at the same time dead but also filled with something...completely different. It was an ancient and endless hatred as some poet would describe it. But, no human being ever hated that much. Or maybe he simply imagined it.

Anyway, Old man died as a rather confused man.

CHAPTER 1

That spring His Majesty, gathering a great host, went after the insolent Ellens. Intimidated by justified raft of His Majesty and being aware of their own vile deeds, the Ellens hid themselves behind their high walls. His Majesty offered them to reach a final decision on the field of honor. But, alas, they refused the offer knowing that because of their numerous crimes they wouldn't enjoy the support of the gods. Royal army, to His glory and to the glory of all Cedons, has surrounded the city with ring made of iron and bronze.

Cedonian royal chronicler

He was lying on his back feeling the warmth of the ground even through his armor. It seemed like forever since he lay down like that. He felt pain all over his body knowing that soon he will just become fed up with all of that. It wouldn't be the first time. He tried to stay focused, he tried and tried, but he knew that he was fighting a losing battle where victory could have been only achieved by delaying a defeat as long as possible. As he stared at the small piece of mirror, his sight became blurred, and image of the city parapet was slowly going out of his focus.

For the entirety of the morning nobody has moved on the wall.

Perhaps they have learned their lesson, however, hoping for the opposite is entirely human.

The crossbow was aimed at a specific opening in the parapet of the wall. The weapon itself wasn't visible to the defenders. The arrow will fly through the little hole in the wall of a siege tower, barely bigger than itself and then it will rush towards the target he was hoping to hit. He used the small piece of mirror for safely observing the situation while lying behind the thick wooden wall of a tower. Everything was set and all he had to do was wait, fighting against his own weakness while doing so.

Summer humidity began to fall and scents of morning freshness were quickly fading away. They will soon become nothing but a nostalgic memory. Then it will become insufferably hot. Beside that, there was also a simply irresistible smell of smoke, today's extra special for duty in front of the walls. Ellens dropped from their battlement some kind of resin mixed with hay, which was actually more smoking than burning. They started this new game a few days ago in order to make their lives miserable. At first he considered that as inhospitality to the guests who came for a visit.

Days went by and he lost his mild criticism mixed with understanding switching to actual cursing and pure hatred towards the enemy.

Cursed be their insides and may they all drop dead without offspring, however – wise men would say – it's all only a man's lot in life.

They were quite cautious while dropping that garbage, not even the top of their helmets peeped over.

It seems that they have really learned their lesson, thought Darik feeling sad.

Eight days ago, one of them peered over the very spot he was looking at just now. He couldn't be certain, but odds on that Ellen surviving an arrow from a crossbow shooting him in the head from this distance, well...weren't really good.

He kept saying to himself to be patient. Those who ran in front of the line or those who foolishly peeped over would lose their head.

Take it easy, there's no rush. After all, this is a siege and they take time. Some more wise words which could be written down in some book.

Still, there came a moment when he decided that he couldn't take it anymore. No wonder; he was sweating all over his face and wasn't feeling very good. It has been enough for today. He sighed making that decision, which wasn't really a difficult one to make. He was fed up with the whole thing. He carefully removed the crossbow from its patched up stand which was keeping it aimed at the spot where a head should have appeared. Then he leaned over the edge of the tower, aimed the crossbow approximately at the top of the city wall and let loose a bolt.

»So?«, asked Lenta after Darik's return to the tower's interior.

»Cut the crap«, he replied, »you can't see a thing.«

Lenta laughed. »Sure you can! From this position I can see nice blue sky, our camp, the rest of our lovely invincible army...«

»Which is lying around, jerking off, fucking whores and boozing while we are stuck here«, added Azar.

»Jerking off and fucking whores?«, asked Darik drawing back his crossbow.

»I mean, those who have already spent their pay. Don't interrupt me, I am gathering momentum. So, we are fighting like heroes...«

»Oh, really? And what do you mean by 'we'?«, he interrupted him annoyed by their nagging. »Why don't you let loose a bolt or two. For the last half hour I am the only one messing around with that shit«, Darik remarked resentfully. His tone wasn't completely fake. His eyes were burning and he also inhaled some Ellenic smoke. He really wasn't in the mood for their usual dumb things.

»You are wasting your arrows. You know, they don't grow on a tree«, said Lenta importantly which made the others laugh.

If there was anything on the ground floor of the siege tower, then there have definitely been arrows. However, there weren't any trees, not the unprocessed ones, if anything.

»Hey neighbors, one basket, all right?«, yelled someone from the top.

»And how about taking some more of that garbage with you than screwing us every now and then!«, yelled Azar in a bad tone. He has been pissed off since morning.

»It's all right, boys!«, jumped in Darik. »Come on, Borna, pass me one.«

Borna didn't do anything foolish this morning and he was generally the calmest of them all. Therefore Darik truly counted on him. Borna looked up from his shield that he was polishing thoroughly. He wasn't really happy about being disturbed while maintaining his equipment, but got up anyway and the two of them dragged the basket with two hundred bolts to the middle of the tower.

»Here it comes, careful lads!«, it could be heard from above. Then a rope with a hook fell on the ground. Darik hung the basket on that hook.

The basket went out of sight in an opening in the ceiling.

»Those guys upstairs waste arrows like the Ellens waste little boys«, noticed Lenta.

They all laughed again. Making fun of perverts from the opposite side has always been popular. Lenta matched his statement with elegant raising of his crossbow and making a step to the edge of the tower's wall. Grinning at the others and specially at Darik, he leaned outside the cover and yelled: »Do you hear me, you cunts!« and then he immediately shot a bolt towards the parapet. »Happy?«, he asked his supposed to be commander after returning inside protection of the wooden walls of the tower. His face was glowing with happiness.

»Ecstatic! All right, if you don't want to be actively involved in a battle, we can all just sit around and wait for a year or two for the Ellens to drop dead from sexual diseases«, Darik said bluntly. At the same time he pricked up his ears in order to hear some response from the Ellens to Lenta's challenge.

Nothing, they aren't even reacting to our curses. What could that mean?

»Stop pouting«, remarked Azar. »There they all are, just lying.« He pointed his hand at Cedonian camp. »There is no point for us to be more active than the majority of the army.«

The camp could be nicely seen, indeed: about fifteen thousand soldiers from the main king's army, their tents, horses in neat rows, thousands of servants and attendants milling around out of range of Ellenic scorpions placed on towers and battlements of the besieged city. A smoke coming from the hundreds of camp fires on which lunch is just being prepared was also pleasant to the sight. Anyway, everything looked cheerful, there was still enough food, the camp was free of diseases and there was not a trace of any Ellenic army marching forth in order to lift the siege. All in all, considering how sieges can be, this one was simply great. Of course, that refers to those who are down in the camp. To the hundred or so warriors in the siege tower, a lovely construction built at the end of a nice vaulted access trench, days were passing by full of stink, exchanging arrows with the Ellens and repulsing, so far, three attempts of the besieged to seize the tower and burn it down.

The tower was actually built on a silly spot; far from it that Darik would ever criticize king's engineers. It was built on a little hill in front of section of the walls where the city battlements were slightly lower than elsewhere. The tower was constructed of earth and wood, right under the enemy's nose, mostly by night, and yet at the cost of losing about twenty workers. It was slightly surpassing the original wall, but right in front of it, on their own wall defenders have raised similar wooden concoction. Therefore, the archers from both sides were actually at the same level. All in all, it was a master-piece of engineering, but completely useless. Anyway, they could all see dozens of siege towers being constructed behind their camp. Obviously, they'll be pushed up to the enemy's walls on a day of a big attack, and it will happen in the coastal plain, and not here in the hilly hinterland.

»Come on, boys, only two more hours till relief. We'll get fucked if someone from commanders decides to take a look and sees us lying about«, Darik pleaded them. »Come on, at least pretend!«

»We are keeping our strength up for the enemy's counter attack«, remarked Lenta. »By the way, I have been active.«

The rest of them carried on with their, whatever it was, pastime. They ignored him quite effectively. Such a behavior used to make him angry. However, it is a sad fact that he has already got used to that.

At that moment there was a noise coming from an access trench which was leading to the camp: silent swear words, tapping of feet, clinking of armor and weapons. It was definitely enough to draw attention of all of them. However, Eli and Ozak kept pretending to be indifferent and continued rolling the dice in their endless game.

»Relief?«, Azar asked suspiciously.

»A little bit too early for that. The sun is still two hands away from noon«, said Borna.

He is definitely an expert for that subject matter; moss always grows on the north side, tree rings, a deer took a crap three hours ago, all about nature and similar stuff, not to say –rubbish, thought Darik and then he returned to his duties.

»Get ready!«, Darik commanded, and that was actually his job. Corporal's engraved feather onto the medallion fixed on the front of the helmet announced to the world who is formally responsible here.

All six of them stood up. While doing so, Eli and Ozak sighed in displeasure.

To interrupt their gambling so completely abruptly!

»They have to be our men, dammit«, hissed Azar. »This is our siege trench which leads to our camp!« The word »our« was emphasized.

A silence fell on a six-member squad. They all knew the answer regarding Azar's conclusions, but still, what if they weren't their men? Two years have passed since their call to arms and they have become very cautious. You could say it has happened naturally.

»Cock!«, it was clearly and sharply said from the trench. Daily password was correct.

»Wine«, Darik replied feeling relieved. However, he just had to criticize them severely: »Why don't you shout a little bit louder. Perhaps they didn't hear you in citadel.«

»The answer is in wine, corporal«, said lieutenant of golden shields getting out of the trench followed by his soldiers.

Having seen the person he snapped at, Darik has almost bitten his tongue. Lieutenant raised his eyebrow and eyed Darik ironically. While doing so he halted causing a traffic jam. Yet, his men were shrewd enough not to draw attention on that fact.

»I apologize, lieutenant, sir, I usually don't keep him in wine«, replied Darik to his own surprise. Obviously he didn't bite his tongue hard enough for one more sassy thing popped out of his mouth.

The lieutenant was looking at Darik with a slight disbelief, and then he passed by snorting at him. Obviously he decided that he doesn't have time for such bullshit, and his men followed him. His armor was fanciful like only those of a guard can be, and that was also his attitude. His soldiers' equipment was more modest, but it was very clear who represented the elite there.

»Relief?«, a confused voice asked from above.

»No«, replied lieutenant impatiently, »reinforcements«, he said, again a little bit too loud.

»Where's captain?«

»Second floor, sir«, replied someone from above, which was followed by ladders weaved of rope falling down. »Here ya go!«

About thirty warriors climbed up one after another. The next four floors of the tower were twice bigger than the ground floor. This occurred because the front of the ground floor was formerly used as a breastwork against the enemy's walls. While they were building the tower, those poor bastards needed all protection they could have gotten. Therefore, there was only room for six men downstairs if scuffle among friends was to be avoided. The lieutenant waited for his men to climb up.

Perhaps he hasn't been here yet, Darik asked himself. There is also a possibility that we didn't see him because he belongs to another shift. This week it could be a night one. However, I didn't see him coming this morning...

The first assumption was soon confirmed.

»Basement?«, the lieutenant asked Darik quietly.

Darik was satisfied with that. It means that this one has some brains after all and listens to perhaps even smarter and surely more experienced people than himself. Darik replied by nodding and then he removed one shabby cover from the ground. With certain effort he raised the lid covering the hole in the ground. The lieutenant waved his hand to the last ten coming from the trench. They didn't have nice guard equipment, but simple clothes and tools for digging, pickaxes, chisels, shovels and mattocks.

They also brought along the appearance of people who belong beneath the ground. Not literally, he grinned to his own joke. Actually, they look quite healthy and strong. Cedonian army feeds its soldiers, and even its auxiliaries, very well.

They entered the underground as quietly as possible. Darik looked questioningly at the lieutenant who shook his head negatively. Upon this the corporal closed the lid and covered it, and then the lieutenant climbed following his men.

»They are speeding up«, whispered Lenta. »Time is coming, boys, and soon.«

»Maybe they are only late with their plan«, said Azar.

»In that case would they reinforce their fighters?«, stated Darik returning to the edge of the tower with his crossbow drawn back.

»Maybe this is their way of camouflaging the arrival of workers«, Borna offered an answer.

»No«, Lenta replied resolutely, »it will be soon and, by all the gods, not a moment too soon.«

»We have been here less than two months, Lenta«, remarked Eli. »You're not missing running around the hills and playing catch me if you can with the Ellens, are you?«

»No, you asshole, but still, I prefer that rather than re-experiencing what happened at Santar.«

A silence fell. Two boys from their village, although from the older generation, died assaulting walls of that city. Piles of corpses under the wall and on battlements of Santar represented the first sight of mass killings they have seen. Hot oil, flaming arrows, human torches, blood everywhere. They were especially impressed by seeing many of their number

climbing ladders with great difficulties and courage and finally as a reward they would fall on the ground with their skull smashed. They didn't run only because behind them stood veterans with drawn swords and pretty clear orders that cowards don't exist among the Cedons, at least not the living ones. Despite all this, they finally climbed over that damn wall.

»Compared to this city Santar is nothing but a village«, Ozak quietly muttered out. »The walls are much higher, there are towers and all kinds of«, he thought hard about the appropriate word, »war machine shits.«

»The citadel«, added Eli, thus completing Ozak's thought, as usual.

»They can't get us here«, said Darik encouragingly.

»Yes, but in a plain, during the main attack?«, shrugged Lenta, thus describing their odds of getting away unharmed.

»No way it is going to be like that«, said Darik resolutely. He was on familiar ground. He was encouraging them and didn't have to lie about it. »We have been dawdling here for three weeks already. I know how the brass thinks. We are here and they are not going to pull us for a main attack. Those lying around over there«, he looked at Azar at the same time waving his hand towards a view of their camp, »they will be the ones doing the main attack. Are you satisfied with such a lineup and forthcoming duties?«

»Fie! Maybe this digging isn't just a diversion. Maybe in the end we will be the ones participating in the main party«, replied Azar pessimistically.

They all went quiet and started chewing over that old-new idea.

Ozak shook his head resolutely. Regarding this matter he was clearly supporting Darik.

»All right, enough about that«, cut in Darik. »We have no idea what those men downstairs are doing, nor what those men upstairs are thinking about. And if anyone is going to lead the attack, it's going to be a guard, hopefully under the command of the pompous«, the last word came out with contempt, »lieutenant.«

»It itches, doesn't it?«, Lenta commented sneeringly.

»You should all be itching, too«, Darik replied bitterly.

»Not all of us are as ambitious as you«, Borna concluded.

»C'mon, he's our age and by looking at him you can see how many battles he has been in, hah!«, irritated by all that he got in Lenta's face. »And there he is; already a lieutenant! That's bullshit«,

Darik ended glumly and then he gave up realizing that he went slightly too far by taking it out on his own friends.

»That dude is a nobleman, and you are not, period. Deal with it, man«, replied Azar.

»We are all free people!«, Darik shouted official slogan. »Free Cedons!«

»We are free to screw sheep during peace«, added Lenta, »and the Ellens during war.«

»And we are doing fine«, Borna said quietly. »Many among the Ellens are only partially free, on the other hand the Romea and those on the east own slaves. We are doing just fine in Cedom and there's nothing to complain about.« He smiled politely and said: »You never

know, Darik, if this war lasts, maybe so many nobles will get themselves killed so that they will just have to promote you into an officer.«

»Gods, help us«, Lenta concluded and by it put him in his place and they all laughed, including Darik.

Darik just couldn't resist not to ad: »From your lips to Thunder god's ear.«

»How about a brunch?«, Azar asked Darik. When it came to food, they tolerated him commanding them.

»All right. That shit they dropped went out so maybe we shall enjoy our meal after all.«

They took out some bread and some cheese and started eating washing down their food with vinegar mixed with water.

»We could have some wine«, muttered out Azar.

»Are you ever satisfied?«, added Eli. »What are we going to have for lunch?«

»Yesterday evening I was boozing with that guy from the logistics. There will be mutton for us in the front lines«, said Azar. He has always been boozing and gossiping with someone. Still, his information has often been quite accurate.

»Wow, roasted or some kind of stew?«, asked Eli and they all looked at him like he's gone mad.

»Eli, could you please tell me when did you see something roasted in this army, and by that I don't mean us or those Ellenic assholes?«, Lenta asked cheerfully.

»Well, there were few times«, Eli spread his arms defensively.

»King's birthdays and celebration of three greater victories, five times altogether, not counting what we nicked, roasted and ate by ourselves«, Darik listed precisely.

»I just couldn't have eaten roasted meat after what had happened in Santar«, Eli said sadly and it was clear that the sadness was caused by a missed roast.

»You have recovered, time heals all wounds«, Lenta commented with a saying.

»True«, Eli agreed. »So, five times. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and there will be six times. As much as the king is screwing around, maybe he'll have a son and thus a big celebration.«

»They are not celebrating a birth of a bastard«, Darik stated professionally. »And for the queen to give birth at this age, Thunder god would have to throw lightning bolt straight to her cunt.«

General laughter. Free Cedons could have freely mock their king and his family, as long as nobody heard them being so free-minded. It was, of course, only a spice compared to two other allowed activities which were on Lenta's mind.

»When we get into the city, there should be a lot of booty, and free of charge women?«, asked Ozak.

That boy is a man of few words, but Gods, bless me, they are quite constructive, Darik thought.

»And what's in it for you?«, Eli asked menacingly which made them all laugh, except Ozak.

»It should be like that«, Darik replied trying to spare Ozak from them fucking him around. »Those guys from Eastern army have feasted quite well at spring when a heir to the throne took the city of Ksipol.«

»Anyway, those are rumors about that.«, Lenta stated cautiously, »but this time we'll have to be careful not to burn down the city nor to slaughter the entire population.«

»Those bastards from Santar got what they deserved«, growled Borna. He couldn't stand that subject matter and they all knew the reason why. They've been there.

Lenta wisely decided to step back. »I definitely agree, but if we care about the booty...«

They finished their meal together with their conversation. They were country boys after all, and the campaign wasn't that intense for them to completely become numb like some of those who've been in it from the very beginning of the war. Most of them were wondering what would people from the village say if they knew what the territorial banner of their province did after the conquest of Santar, although they were nothing but Ellenic dogs who definitely got what they deserved. Women would be the most critical here, therefore it was for the best not to tell them anything. Older men understood the whole situation better because they've experienced it by themselves.

Darik methodically shot the rest of the bolts from the quiver actually trying to occupy himself till the end of the shift. Of course, he shot them blindly. There was no reason for risking one's head. However, now it could be clearly seen there's no one peering over the walls. Probably the archers and crossbowmen from the higher floors have scared them away or they've made them lie down, and the main party was going on between the very top of the tower and a cute Ellenic extension on their wall. One particular function of Darik's arrows was to make the Ellens believe the following: these men downstairs are not aiming at a specific spot.

Who knows, maybe they have been that foolish after all? That could be very useful during the next few days.

Eli and Ozak continued their gambling giving a perfect glimpse onto soldiers who expertly do nothing at all. Borna completely cleaned all parts of his equipment and for some time he was even occupied with drawing and unstringing his bow. While doing so he was muttering something skillfully. He was the only one carrying a bow and arrows which he has used expertly since the time he was at home. There he hunted rabbits and occasionally deer. Therefore, it used to be nice staying for dinner at his old man's. The other five of them were carrying crossbows, a weapon which doesn't take long to learn how to use it. Of course, arrows are loosed much faster by using a bow, but in order to shoot precisely years of practice are necessary, years which Borna had usefully spent accompanying his father on hunting trips. They were mostly hunting animals for fur which they used to sell to peddlers. They mostly set traps, however they were also very familiar with direct way of hunting.

The rest of them used to watch the sheep as children. In fact, they were mostly just hanging around and their dogs were actually doing everything for them. Therefore, they spent their last year before leaving for a compulsory military training breaking their back in the family fields plowing and using a mattock.

All right, all of them except for Lenta. His father was an innkeeper and he used his son for wood chopping for a kitchen, as a cook assistant and as a stable boy. Some of those jobs were not really the cleanest, but they were definitely better than plowing. His father had money

and he was respectable enough to become a village elder for most years. Still, he didn't get his son out of recruitment. There were rumors in the village about him beating the shit out of his wife because she was constantly nagging him to save his son from military service. Old man was a cook in an army of a present-day king Illip's father and he was very proud of that. Allegedly, he made a fortune out of booty, according to malicious tongues he had resold supplies, and upon his return to the village he opened an inn. The best one in the valley, as Lenta's father used to brag. The fact that it was actually the only one didn't make it any less true.

When their time came, the war had already lasted for three years. Therefore, what used to be a merry send off for half a year of military service turned to a sad farewell, and maybe even forever. They were all collectively sent away to be trained for assault infantry. That term sounded quite important. The boys from lowland villages went to line infantry where they practiced close pike formations. Since they were highlanders, it was assumed that running over hills and making sure that the main army was making unhindered progress was somehow in their nature. Of course, that wasn't true, but it represented their official reputation. Therefore, they felt proud, that they will be the unpaid version of famous king's golden shields.

When they arrived at Lipea, where a camp for assault infantry training was situated, they were welcomed by a nice bunch of older noncommissioned officers who started immediately teaching them manners. They were constantly yelling at them repeating that there is a war going on and there's no time for mama's cooking. There is no denying it, they all knew their job and they were training them thoroughly. They even had a wall made of earth. By the wall there was a trench and a small siege tower made of wood which they used to practice attacks on fortified positions. While they were falling down all around, noncommissioned officers were laughing at them with a message: »And why do you think they call you assault infantry?«

Although the weapons were wooden or blunted, it was all very dangerous. Luckily, nobody died, but there were two boys who were dismissed from further royal service because they had suffered multiple broken bones. To tell the truth, they were honorably discharged. If things had been different, they couldn't have returned home. Allegedly, that happened to one whose name mustn't be mentioned, about a year before their arrival. He was dishonorably dismissed for stealing and thereby actually expelled from the kingdom. Nobody was allowed to give him either water or fire, to be honest, nobody would really want to. Not because of stealing – the crime was irrelevant – but because of dishonorable discharge from the military. Allegedly, it was his second time. However, the first time they let him off lightly giving him a second chance. Of course, all of that was nothing but gossip and no one knew the real truth. However, the story represented a significant warning to all of them.

The training was extensive. They were teaching them basics of a sword fighting. The sword was quite longer than the one used by line infantry. They were explained that it was because front line soldiers don't have enough space and when they cast aside a long spear, they can only use their sword for thrusting. On the other hand, assault infantry soldiers are more scattered in a combat, so they can swing around with their sword.

Some of them even started boasting about having a longer sword than front liners'.

His whole head rang when Little Sunshine whacked him with his bat on the helmet. Why did he choose him of all people for educational part of the training, he didn't know. Noncommissioned officer popular among the recruits wasn't really known for predictability and logical behavior. Then he yelled at him and gave a message to the whole unit: »Don't you

dare attacking a compact and ready for a combat enemy line infantry frontally! No matter that we have a longer one.«

Little Sunshine was also prone to shenanigans, but Gods forbid if you smiled at one of his jokes. Darik was allowed to grin now so he actually did it.

»Indeed we have a longer sword, but those guys have , together with the blade, spears which are seven steps long!«, Little Sunshine finished his lesson.

However, he didn't stop at this. He was among the best. Damned psycho, Darik remembered while shaking his head, but not without being somewhat fond of him. Does he still drill the kids or did they finally let him join the operational army? If the answer is the latter, many Ellens' mother will mourn their son. He grinned even more and then the grin disappeared from his face.

They even brought in a trained line infantry company in order to present them their combat style. Indeed, hardly anything could have gotten through that spear thicket. One platoon had tried and got a good beating. They were weeping over their bruises for entire week thereafter. What would have happened if it hadn't been only a drill and the liners had had pikes with actual spear heads? Darik has experienced all that damn well and that was something he didn't like to remember. He even disliked less a recollection of a cut caused by Ellenic sword on his left hand about a year ago, than a memory of that beating. Then they were teaching them crossbow handling techniques by which they were supposed to terrorize the enemy's close infantry formations and cavalry. Borna ended up on advanced training for bow and arrow archers. Their training mostly consisted of enrichment of camp's diet with game caught on hillsides of surrounding mountains.

They were teaching them how to throw a spear, and only the real basics of; spear fighting, in combat without any weapons, how to use a knife or a dagger, swimming for beginners. There wasn't any problem with the last thing because, thanks to one old king's order, for decades already all the boys were supposed to learn how to swim at home.

One of more interesting lessons was the one in escaping, pretending to be dead and hiding from the enemy. It seemed improper to them that king's soldiers should run from anyone or anybody. However, after few punches and furious yelling of an instructor, that mission of a royal soldier is to survive and fight the next day and not to try to be an honorable corpse. The drill instructor was a former assault trooper and also a golden shield member, so they accepted the lesson, unwillingly though.

We were once so full of ourselves.

When they finished the training, as said by noncommissioned officers, the best as could be done without serious spilling of blood, they took an oath of allegiance to the king. Unfortunately, he wasn't present in person at the ceremony, but there was his middle son wearing a nice gilded armor, sitting on a beautiful black horse and followed by a hundred of knights of his guard.

All in all, it was quite impressive. The oath itself was especially profound while they were repeating the camp commander's words about loyalty until death under threat of punishment by all gods with their curse. The ceremony took place in the evening under lights of many torches. It was really magnificent, especially for the country boys who had never before left their village for more than ten miles.

Days were passing by and the memories were fading away which was inevitable. However, the thought about that very evening was still giving Darik the shivers. It was like that memory was carved in their mind as in a stone. It was exactly what the priests had said it would be like. Before the ceremony they drank consecrated wine of the gods and were also sprinkled with blood of sacrificed animals. It was simply stunning, it seemed for a moment they themselves were godlike.

While daydreaming Darik was pleased by the neatness of the camp he was looking at. It made him proud to be a Cedon, member of the best nation in the whole world and favored by the gods. And the king himself was excellent. Sometimes he used to fight like a champion in the front ranks and his charge of the army was deemed as very efficient. They all agreed upon that. In general, he was quite a hero, they loved him as much as a king could be loved. His sons weren't bad also. Allegedly, their old man was a hard ass, all in order for them to be worthy of succeeding him. Finally, The Cedonian crown cannot be passed on to anyone. Cedonian kings have always been warriors and not some fat, lazy pigs. Darik has heard that there are some nations who actually stand for being ruled by such men. That, however, wouldn't ever fly in Cedon.

Regarding the enemy's leaders, well...they've actually never heard of them, in other words none of them had the kindness of showing up where the war was actually fought and leading their soldiers into battle. Even the rulers of the city they were besieging were some kind of old geezers doing nothing but debating. It was like they were running some hamlet town and not one of the biggest Elenic cities. Veterans who were once much farther to the south said that there are even bigger Elenic cities, but not many. Their armies were commanded by professional generals or sometimes even mercenaries and their armies also consisted of such soldiers.

Last year during one skirmish, two days of march from here Darik shot one of their, hm...men, completely black. After the battle some of them took his clothes off and even tried washing the soot off him. Well, during the night battles both them and the Ellens were regularly blackening their faces in order to be less visible. But, you see, that corpse remained black. The older and more experienced soldiers said that such men live far away, over the sea, in very hot countries, so probably that's why they got burned. Those veterans were real source of information, even though quite a lot of their boasting should have been written off. Those were the friendly ones, the ones who used to talk. The others, those who were quiet, of them you should be wary of.

But who would know all things under the sky?

He never saw such mercenaries again. You might say all sorts of things about the Ellens, and yet they have a normal skin color.

The camp covered an area south of the city and it was directly on the way of any of the Elenic reinforcements. It was even partly fortified, but not from the outside. The Cedons don't hide behind the walls. There was a long wooden palisade surrounding the city in order to prevent spies or messengers from passing this way. There were also about ten ships of Cedonian navy, which were blockading the city from the sea.

The Ellens once used to be a powerful sea force, but these days that was an ancient history. Although in theory, they were still strong, their mutual distrust provided opportunities even for feeble Cedonian navy to be successful in blockading the city. Allegedly the king was

dissatisfied with that weakness and wanted to fix it, but making the free Cedons sail in those wooden shells...

The powers of the king are also limited and that's a good thing.

However, it must be admitted that they were very pretty with their colorful sails and bright red hulls with oars like centipede's legs. As long as they were being watched from a respectful distance. But the sea, now, that was something incredible. Last year, when they saw it for the first time, the whole banner inadvertently halted which made the veterans laugh heartily. It was like they themselves didn't stare exactly the same when they saw it for the first time. Cedon, to tell the truth, had an exit to the sea, but that was far away from their home and they had heard only stories about that salt water, and, of course, had seen the salt merchants had been bringing.

It was a beautiful day. The sea was blue in the east, and orchards were full of peaches which have just been ripening. The orchards were right behind the camp. The king's ban on cutting off the fruit-trees: nor for fuel, siege engines or just out of spite, said a lot.

The king wants the city, and not only as a mistress, but for good. Bad news for the queen. Darik smiled at his own witticism and saved it for later, in order to use it aloud.

The same thing happened with wheat fields in the entire hinterland of the city. The siege started after the sowing and the cavalry dashed from the north so fast that the Ellens didn't manage to destroy the most of the crops before they were forced to pull back and retreat behind their walls. The wheat was now ripening and at the back of the camp everything was yellow. Darik really hoped that captured inhabitants of the city would pick it up so they wouldn't have to bother with those agriculture works. They used to do that by themselves, but not anymore, and they even started looking down at the peasants a bit.

Then he wished for a peach. The sun was high in the sky and the roasting has already started in earnest, so everybody slipped deeper into the tower. Lenta popped out a couple of times so he could take a look at the walls.

He is conscientious to the core although he pretends that he takes everything lightly.

He was something closest to a nobleman they had in the village so probably that's why he copied their »take it easy!« attitude. However, his old man didn't tolerate such a behavior in his inn so that was actually something that was only on the surface for Lenta. His father's belt has taught him appropriate behavior after all.

Darik took off his helmet, a beautiful new iron model, he polished it a bit, although that wasn't necessary – it was perfectly clean. He got really lucky here. Most of the soldiers were still wearing old helmets, a combination of iron, bronze and leather.

One above the other on the helmet's front there were: a medallion with engraved feather, designating corporal's rank, a medallion with assault infantry emblem, esca and mesca crossed out over the round shield. They needed a little cleaning so he spit in a small cloth and polished them. He looked at the helmet feeling proud and almost forgot about the humidity. His headscarf was wet from sweat, but it was summer.

What is more natural than gods torturing people with heat in the summer, and coldness in the winter?

It was a beautiful headscarf, for Darik at least. A part of a home. It was a custom that, since who knows when, mothers knit lining for helmets of their sons who are going to war. Darik's mother and his sisters have knitted this one, although every woman and every girl in the village added one stitch just for luck. Similar headscarves were property of, well ...everyone. Borna's aunt knitted him a headscarf because his mother died giving birth to his youngest brother. Because of that, those headscarves were so beautiful. Darik has never heard that someone has replaced them. They were having them until they would fall to pieces by themselves. No matter how much someone looted by plundering during the campaign, no kind of silk could have replaced them.

He cleaned the rest of the equipment, and thoroughly examined his leather armor and each of its metal reinforcements. A tunic made of thick wool, which had a function of an armor lining, was one of the reasons they were so hot. However, without them the armor wouldn't have performed its function at all. Perhaps it would have protected them from the blade, but the intensity of the strike would have broken their bones and caused them severe internal injuries. Therefore, the lining had to be worn, which was followed by unavoidable torment. His shield was placed in the tower, so after short consideration he decided to give in to the general sloppiness, which was, apparently, the side effect of boredom, and leave it there. The armor was in a good condition.

Thanks to our good king Illip and to his equipment suppliers.

Old man, what they sometimes used to call the king, stuck to ancestors' wisdom that a soldier without his armor thinks more about running away than about fighting. Darik owed his life, or if anything he avoided severe wounds, specifically twice, to that armor. In both cases it was a matter of the sword's blade, which while cutting simply didn't pass through it. Darik seriously doubted he would have been here now if his enemies had had some heavier weapons such as an axe or a mace. Other services were better armor-protected: line infantry had chainmail shirts, and heavy cavalry even had armor plates besides the chainmail. Still, the reason for weaker, but lighter armor was probably the fact that assault infantry couldn't run over hills with all that extra armor on them. Or, there wasn't enough money for all of them to get proper equipment; mobilized liners also sometimes used to get leather armors.

Who would know?

He closed his eyes for a bit, just for a little rest. Sometimes he would do that while lying on the grass, on the warm ground and those would have been his nicest naps. Here, close to the enemy, something like that was out of the question. He didn't want to wake up with his throat slit, so he kept sitting and soaking up the sunlight consciously fighting off sleep.

He wasn't quite sure whether he was mistaken about the ground vibrating or not, but there was definitely something going on underground.

Who knows how much longer?

Darik thought that Lenta was probably right.

It will be soon.

The sun reached the highest point of its daily route and then he heard the noise coming from the access trench again, but this time he wasn't surprised. A broad smile went over his face when he waved to his boys behind him a bit lazily. They all stood up, maybe not too energetically, but definitely willingly. Crossbows and Borna's bow were aimed at the trench's

exit, maybe two steps in front of Darik himself. He stood up after all of them and then he drew back his crossbow. After that he strolled up to the spot he was sitting at a little while ago. Exactly at that moment a familiar face peeked out of the trench.

»Cock«, said the corporal sneering to the crossbow, which was aimed at his head.

»Says who?«, Darik replied extending his hand.

»This password is good. It's like a quartermaster has invented it.«, Druza came out from the trench laughing. He was followed by his brave men.

»While we're at it, what's for lunch?«, Eli asked hopefully.

»Some kind of stew with mutton«, replied Druza to Eli's disappointment. »It was still simmering when we left. Any news on our neighbors?«

»Nothing«, replied Darik. »They were throwing stinky balls for much of the morning, but besides that there wasn't a peep out of them. By the way, those ones downstairs got reinforcements.«

»Gods! There will be even more work to do during the night so we could distract attention of those bastards on the walls from the noise coming from downstairs.«

»I feel you«, replied Darik, »but we were the ones who sang last week, and now... Anyway, stop whining! Dani and his men have a night shift. Poor things, they were all hoarse this morning when we took over the shift.«

»Fie, it will get dark before they arrive. We'll have to sing one.« Druza grinned from ear to ear. He just loved singing.

»That's a cruel torture of the enemy. Even in war there are boundaries that shouldn't be crossed.«, he teased him. He didn't have a particular opinion about their skill.

Actually, there wasn't any noise, however the orders were that the Ellens shouldn't be left alone day or night. For this reason, they kept themselves and them awake, cursing the enemy and howling all night, sometimes even literally.

»All right, all right.« Druza wasn't in the mood anymore.

I hope he's not insulted by remark about his performance quality, thought Darik.

»Anything else?«

»The whole platoon of golden shields came upstairs. Does this qualify as anything?«

Druza went quiet. Now he was worried, and all of his boys were also listening carefully.

»Do you think it's going to happen soon?«, Druza asked Darik.

On hearing that question, Lenta glowed.

»Probably«, replied Darik carefully. Even that made the newcomers concerned, so he decided to make a joke of it. »Although, I must be honest and admit that His Majesty doesn't confide in me like he used to.«

A weak smile at colleague corporal's face. Nobody else, not even that much. Silence.

And it was a good joke!

»Hem, shall we consider the relief done, corporal?«, asked Darik, which made Druza twitch.

»Of course, I will take over the position, corporal.«Druza then pointed his finger towards upstairs.

»The captain is on the second floor, or at least he was there two hours ago«, Darik answered an unasked question.

Druza nodded and waved to Darik, who immediately turned away and went outside. All of his men have already been ready to move, but they were supposed to wait for the command.

»Let's go, boys!«

Lenta was the first one who obeyed and jumped into the trench. Soon, the rest of them followed his example. Darik stayed at the rear. The trench was dug up in such a way that two people could walk side by side, although to tell the truth, in bent posture. It was covered with huge knitted shields covered with leather in order to protect them from arrows and also from gazes from the walls. That was a plus. Horrible stuffiness and heat in the trench represented a minus.

»I'll be a bit behind you!«, shouted Darik. »Wait for me at the exit.«

»Enjoy«, said Borna laughing. He was next to the last one.

The rest of them were making some remarks which were hard to understand and were also swearing at him. Darik let them get ahead, and then he got to the edge of one shield and raised it a little bit. They didn't get too far; there weren't more than two hundred steps to the walls. At the edge, but still within range of arrows coming from the battlements. Darik was otherwise cautious, but he just couldn't resist that. The walls were really impressive when you get a closer look and they were worth seeing. A small hill from which they have just come down and their famous tower, wooden concoction on the opposite wall, outlines of the citadel behind all of that and a long wall extending to the sea, with a tower every one hundred steps. Even some city roofs could be seen and some buildings even had four floors.

Those Ellens really know how to build, no matter that otherwise they're all bunch of ass fuckers, thought Darik.

He understood the king. If he was him, he would also like to rule that city. There was nothing alike in Cedon, not even Tesal, the capital city of the kingdom. It didn't even have a quarter of the population of this miracle in front of his very eyes. He understood the king, but the only problem was that king's desires could get into a direct conflict with Darik's desire for surviving the exchange of Espont's proprietor.

But what can you do? The king gives orders and we obey. The world functions in such a way, and it is only a man's lot in life.

Darik put down the covering and went after his boys.