



CHAPTER THREE

Just Outside Bainsmarket

General Gralan Deckley asked, “Are you prepared to welcome your true king?”

He was wearing his dress uniform for the first time in years and seemed at pains to try to appear comfortable in it. The commander ostensibly in charge of Cygnar’s oft-overlooked Fourth Army was not a man especially fond of formality or strict discipline. A heavyset man in his late fifties, he had grown soft over the years, indulging himself at Duke Dergeral of Thuria’s well-attended parties. His reddish hair was thinning, though he had taken the time to groom his short beard and moustache and he seemed properly dignified in his uniform and medals. A discerning eye might have noticed how few of these shiny medallions were noteworthy, representing length of service more than heroism or accomplishment.

Colonel Lynn Hawkins gave him a sardonic smile, her arms folded in front of her, and said, “I’d feel much better if I had a drink. Or three. Sadly, this is one of those rare times I’m better off sober.”

Hawkins was almost of an age with the general, though in most

other regards she was a sharp contrast. Her hair had gone mostly white and her face was lined, but she was a lean and fit woman, tall and broad-shouldered, and she occupied her warcaster armor comfortably. Her green eyes were cold but her expression was more amused than stern. She had never found it useful to take things too seriously, an attitude that together with her checkered service record had not endeared her to Cygnar's chain of command.

"I should say so, yes! His Majesty has need of us, for which I am thankful. But I daresay he would have picked others in our places were he at liberty to do so. Don't push your luck, Colonel Hawkins." He used a piece of silk cloth to mop sweat from his brow. It was no secret in the Fourth Army or beyond that General Deckley only had his position thanks to the support and influence of the Duke of Thuria. He was a competent officer and bureaucrat but was no great leader. In another army it was doubtful he would have risen to command rank.

"Never fear, I will show him proper respect," Hawkins said, adjusting her armor and trying to ignore a twinge of pain in her back. She was getting no younger. Strapped across her back was a heavy mechanikal Thurian hammer, a relatively short polearm with the head of a war hammer backed by a sharp spike and tipped with a second sharpened point that made it as effective for thrusting as for smashing. It was a versatile and useful weapon, especially effective against heavy armor. She was in all regards attired for war, not a military parade, and so wore none of her few medals. She felt they conveyed a lack of confidence.

They had assembled a small but well-armed force that had gathered on a short rise outside the city of Bainsmarket, a readied

battalion at attention to receive their sovereign. All of those arrayed here, including Hawkins herself, wore uniforms and armor that displayed not the bright sapphire blue most common among Leto's armies but the midnight hue from the time of his elder brother. This was a distinction that could easily be overlooked, as many older warjacks and banners still used the darker color. In the last several weeks more and more officers and soldiers in the Fourth had been encouraged to take it up.

Looking over the battalion, Hawkins admired the perfect lines of soldiers with rifles held at the exact same angle, both the repeating rifles of the long gunner companies and the heavier bayonet-affixed military rifles of their trencher counterparts. In front of the rest stood a smaller platoon of hardened and elite trencher commandos. They held their carbines at parade rest in one hand, while the other held trench knives drawn and pointing downward from fists pressed against their chests. She could not remember ever seeing soldiers of the Fourth Army so neatly arrayed.

It was a sad fact that the Fourth was the dumping ground of the Cygnaran Army, the place they sent the discipline problems, the insubordinate, the drunk and disorderly. It was the last place a soldier might retain a uniform and a government wage before being dishonorably discharged. Commanding officers like General Deckley and Colonel Hawkins had worked over the last few years to forge a dedicated force of handpicked soldiers into something more. These soldiers were given the hope of transforming Cygnar through bloodshed into a place where they could hold their heads high. At the end of the coming war, they would be heroes—no longer disdained but feared and respected.

The army's reputation was not entirely a lie. The Fourth included plenty of worthless soldiers, though recent fighting against trollkin uprisings had culled the worst of them. The army retained this core of dedicated warriors willing to lay down their lives and fight their countrymen to cast down the usurper. Hawkins had selected the most hard-headed and defiant soldiers, taking them under her command to turn those flaws into virtues. For the battles ahead, they needed soldiers who could think for themselves and improvise.

As yet most of their army stood their posts, awaiting the call to action. It would not do for too many to begin assembling, not until they were ready. The main army did not trust the Fourth to fight on the front line but were willing to use them to hold fortified positions to which the active armies could retreat. Deckley had carefully positioned his people, adjusting their numbers as necessary. Their long wait was almost over. Loyalist nobles gathered in Bainsmarket had brought with them their households, including as many armed vassals and liegemen as each could muster. This was a dangerous move that could betray their conspiracy, but the long period of secrecy was ending. Final confirmation had been word that the king himself was on his way.

"The men look good, Major Faulker," Hawkins said to her immediate subordinate in charge of the battalion. He accepted the compliment with a simple nod.

Her attention was diverted when she caught sight of the approaching wagons, seeing them through the eyes of a Defender warjack positioned at the highest point of the hill overlooking the road. Hawkins had brought with her a small battlegroup. It was more a matter of pride than of necessity; she felt the need to display

a tangible reminder that she was still a warcaster.

She had the single Defender and an equally war-seasoned Sentinel she kept nearer to herself and the general. The Defender, an old and reliable machine she called Bellringer, was equipped with a powerful long-ranged cannon for its right arm and wielded a voltaic hammer in its left. These warjacks had lasted almost unchanged in the Cygnaran Army for more than forty years for a reason—they excelled both at range and in melee, and the Ironclad chassis they were built on was known for reliability. The Sentinel she called Lodestone, since it had a knack for attracting bullets. Equipped with a chain gun on one arm and a thick, heavy combat shield on the other, each Sentinel was built and trained to protect nearby allies, but some were better at it than others. Several of Hawkins' officers owed their lives to Lodestone, though its reflexes had not been tested in years.

The foremost wagon bore a distinct diagonal splash of white paint, the indicator they had been told to look for. All three wagons were of the sort preferred for military troop transport, though they did not show the Cygnus. The draft horses pulling them looked lathered and wild-eyed, suggesting they had been pushed hard. They came to a halt a couple dozen yards from where the colonel and general stood, Lodestone just behind them. The warjack's head with its glowing red eyes fixated intently on the wagon, picking up on the tension and posture of its controlling warcaster.

From the wagons spilled a number of ragtag soldiers, as dusty and disheveled as Hawkins' people were crisp and clean. They carried their rifles loosely or bore them strapped across their backs in a familiar, comfortable style. Most were unshaven and unkempt and

had a wild look about them. Amid the ragged cloaks and uniforms she could see long gunner and trencher armor as well as a few who might once have once been rangers. Their uniforms displayed torn holes and patches where military insignia used to be.

These were men and women who had long ago deserted their posts, some of them back at the first hint of the king's return to Corvis. It was clear the last few years had been difficult for them. Every one of these arrivals was gaunt, their eyes a bit unsettled. They stared at the arrayed soldiers awaiting them with barely restrained resentment. Hawkins couldn't blame them. They had been risking their lives for some time now, while her people had lived comfortably, guarding the peaceful shared border with Ord.

Stepping down from the nearest wagon was a legend from the past come to life. He was a powerfully built man, six-and-a-half feet tall, dressed in imposing plated armor painted black and showing gold accents. Subtle patterns of thorny vines were inscribed into its broad pauldrons. He wore a cloak the rich color of fresh blood. Though he was fifty-five years old, his shoulder-length hair was still raven black with just a few hints of grey. His features were square and hard, made sharper by a short goatee, an aquiline nose, and the studded patch over his left eye. His good eye locked onto hers with a piercing stare as he stepped toward them. He moved with easy power and grace, not at all impaired by his heavy armor. The famous greatsword Kingslayer was strapped across his back, its hilt and blade together nearly equal to his height. She felt overcome by awe as he approached. She had thought herself inured to such feelings.

General Deckley spoke first, his voice quavering a little. "King

Vinter Raelthorne the Fourth, we your loyal subjects greet you and offer our renewed and undying fealty.” With this he went to a knee, managing the maneuver reasonably well despite his weight. Hawkins also took a knee just a few seconds after, and with her simultaneously knelt her warjacks and all the soldiers of her battalion. She felt proud of her people and relieved they had not embarrassed her.

King Vinter inclined his head, then bade them rise. “General Deckley, I am glad to accept your service. I know you worked long and hard to ready the Fourth Army for this moment, accepting no small risk to do so.” He looked out upon the lines of soldiers and after a pause said, “I had expected a larger force.”

The general hastened to reply, “Consider these men and women your honor guard, Your Majesty. I await your order to assemble the entire army. Most of my people remain in place as reserves at garrisons across the northern region, prepared should we require them to seize control where they are. Your loyal nobles assemble not far from here, and each has brought what loyal knights and soldiers they could muster. It will be a formidable army, ready to do your bidding.”

It was difficult to read Vinter’s expression but the answer seemed to satisfy. After a moment he turned his attention to her. “Colonel Hawkins,” he said, “I was pleased to discover you would be among those leading our forces.”

She inclined her head, “Thank you, Your Majesty. It is a great honor.”

He gave her an appraising look and said, “I understand it has been some time since you saw combat.”

She gave a pained smile. “That is true, I’m afraid.” She knew not to offer excuses. “We have only had a few skirmishes with bandits and trollkin recently. Little other action of note.”

There was no warning before Vinter was in motion, his sword drawn and closing on her. She had sensed the change in his stance an instant before he drew—not enough time to consciously realize his intent, but enough so she could put all her will into the arcane turbine connected to her armor. The previously invisible power field shimmered to full strength around her even as Vinter’s sword fell. She stepped back and raised her arm with her right vambrace to intercept the downward sweeping blade.

There was a surge of light and sparks flew as Kingslayer crashed through the power field. She felt the impact all the way through her arm, though the field and armor robbed the blow of its momentum. She leapt back as Vinter’s second swing took his blade through the space where she had been. She recovered her Thurian hammer from her back and brought it up to block as Vinter’s third swing came down to meet the haft with a jarring clang of metal on metal. It sent her skidding back several inches even with the augmented strength of her warcaster armor.

She drew on her arcane power and visualized the runes of a battle spell but stopped when she saw the king halt his attack as swiftly as he had begun it. Lodestone had lumbered forward, its protective instincts activated at the outset of the exchange, but Hawkins commanded it to halt. Vinter gave a short chuckle and smiled more fully, and returned Kingslayer to his back. He said, “I’m glad to see your reflexes are intact.”

“As am I,” she said. She let loose a breath in relief. Looking down

she saw the steel of her right vambrace was deeply scored where the sword had kissed it. Managing this through an overboosted power field was remarkable. The blade he wielded was not mechanical like her hammer but held some older magic that kept its edge pristine and as keen as broken glass. Rumors said it could cut through warjack armor, and she believed it.

He said, "You do not appear to have suffered from your years of neglect. You know, had I kept you closer to the palace in those final months of 594, perhaps things might have turned out differently."

It was an unexpected compliment, and Hawkins felt gratified to hear it. She said, "I like to think that might be true. Certainly my life would have been different. I wish I had been there, Your Majesty." She was stationed along the northern border when reports of the palace coup had reached her. Even then she had been on the outs with her commanding officers, who had isolated and watched her in case she decided to interfere with the changeover. It had all happened so quickly that there had not been any opportunity, even if she had been so inclined.

"I understand you took Leto's pardon rather than taking to the countryside and joining those who refused to bow to my brother." He said this flatly, without obvious condemnation.

She knew he referred to Commander Asheth Magnus, who had fought beside him in the coup and who had remained defiant to Leto after. "I'm afraid I've never had much tolerance for living off the land or chasing down my supper. Not that accepting the pardon did much to help my career."

He smiled. "Does my brother have so many warcasters that he can spare to have veterans sitting idle in a time of war?"

"I'd think not, Your Majesty. But I stand disgraced. They didn't trust me to follow orders and worried I would imperil any missions I was assigned. I had a reputation for not getting along with others. They kept me in reserve, like most in the Fourth, against some potential need. But no matter how bad things got, they never seemed inclined to send for me." She realized she might be letting her tongue run away from her. Before the Lion's Coup she'd had only limited contact with King Vinter, not enough to gauge his temperament or his sense of humor.

He stared at her levelly. It was hard to tell if there was censure in those eyes. He said, "Disgraced, dishonored, and banished to Thuria, there to become self-indulgent and corrupt. As with General Deckley, you were bought by Duke Dergeral, become a sell-sword in all but name. Is your loyalty only to coin?"

She took in a deeper breath and considered his words. Clearly he was testing her, though she was not certain where the buried mines lay. "What caused my disgrace had nothing to do with corruption. Rather, an unwillingness to endure a fool of a superior officer. Once they pulled me from the front lines, everything changed. Perhaps I let myself be bought, but only after they took my livelihood. Gold is good against boredom, of which I've had plenty. The main thing I longed for was not wealth or comfort but the chance to fight for someone I respected. Duke Dergeral is a clever man, powerful and a shrewd politician, but I've never felt any special loyalty to him or his coin. He lives in a different world." She looked back to the lines of soldiers with their rifles and inclined her head toward them as she said, "That's my world."

He nodded once, seeming pleased at her explanation. He turned

back to Deckley and said, “And you, General? Where do you stand? What use are you to me?”

“Ah, well, Your Majesty, you know me. I’m rusty at being a commander on the battlefield. I’d be lying if I said otherwise. But I can spot natural leaders, and I can help them do their jobs. Hawkins has my trust and my confidence. You won’t find better. We’re both committed, fully and entirely. We are yours. I serve the duke because I know him to be your man.” This last seemed unlikely, Hawkins thought, as Deckley owed the duke everything he had. Still, the words had to be said. Vinter was not a man who was comfortable with divided loyalties, as anyone who had lived through the Inquisition knew full well. Deckley added, “I will serve you however you see fit.”

“I need many sorts of talents to rule this realm,” Vinter said after a moment. “There is a place for men like our mutual friend Duke Dergeral and also one for men like yourself, General. An army has various needs. It requires its battlefield commanders but also those who ensure its soldiers are where they need to be, equipped properly, and trained for the tasks ahead. So long as you do what I ask, I will not demand you lead any charges into barbed-wire trenches.”

Deckley inclined his head gratefully. “That is a relief. I serve at your pleasure.”

Vinter looked between them before he nodded, apparently satisfied. He said, “Let us greet the rest of my loyal subjects.”

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They entered Bainsmarket with the returned king seated inside one of the closed troop transport wagons and made their way to

the sizable estate of Baron Wolfe Blackwood, who was hosting the others already gathered. The people in the street, with no idea what was transpiring, paid their passage little mind. These people had long become inured to troop movements through the city; Bainsmarket was one of the main stops along the railway from northern to southern Cygnar.

It was clear to Hawkins that Vinter had chosen this city as a starting point for strategic reasons. Seizing control of Bainsmarket would put the former king in a powerful position, for it served as a hub for commerce and ensured vital commodities like grain and meat reached the far corners of the realm. Once he made his move, Vinter's forces would have access to ample food stores while also being able to cut Leto's military garrisons off from those same supplies.

At the estate they were greeted by a procession of nobles who had joined the conspiracy to overthrow Leto the Usurper. Colonel Hawkins had little interest in the pomp and circumstance and soon became bored with the repetition of people approaching Vinter to offer loyalty and service. That said, she did find it gratifying to stand at Vinter's side as he was received by some of the most powerful men in the kingdom.

His choosing to arrive alongside his ranking military officers was no accident. It created the impression Vinter had a ready army standing by, one to which their own swords and banners would be joined. Vinter always preferred to act from a position of strength, whether real or perceived. Discredited though the Fourth might be, they were still army regulars, with the training, discipline, and armament that afforded. *Well, maybe not all of the discipline,*

Hawkins thought, considering how debauched some of their officers had become over the years, herself included.

Their meeting with Duke Dergeral of Thuria was more interesting. Both Hawkins and Deckley had been working closely for the duke for some time. Vinter's initial conversation with him was carefully worded to reinforce that the armed forces the duke had sponsored were now under Vinter's absolute control.

"Thank you," Vinter said, "for hosting the Fourth Army for so many years and ensuring they were made ready for my arrival."

Dergeral's ample frame was draped in his typical finery, not hiding his wealth, and he held a goblet of wine as he bowed deeply. He took Vinter's greeting in stride, as if oblivious to its underlying meaning. He was more than willing to leave the messy details of seizing the throne to others. In some ways he was the opposite of Vinter—a man who preferred to look weak and indolent, though Hawkins knew from experience that his mind was keenly sharp. There were only a few other individuals present who had done as much to pave the way for Vinter's return.

Of those gathered, the most powerful by far was Archduke Fergus Laddermore of the Southern Midlunds, who approached next. He was a tall and stately man possessed of considerable dignity and gravitas, his thin beard and moustache impeccably groomed. Unlike Dergeral, his attire was elegant but simple, showing no sign of the vast wealth he had accumulated controlling the farmlands that fed Caspia. Vinter met Laddermore warmly, as though reuniting with an old friend. Colonel Hawkins had had little contact with the archduke but knew him to be one of the most influential men in the kingdom, a dominating presence in the

Cygnaran Royal Assembly in Caspia. His animosity to King Leto was longstanding and deep. Under Vinter his family had ruled all the Midlunds, not just a quarter of them.

Hawkins also knew from her early days as a soldier that King Vinter had executed Laddermore's father for treason. At the time the senior Laddermore had held the position of Warmaster General. After his execution, that post was given to Vinter's younger brother, Prince Leto. One could make the argument that this had been the primary mistake that had led to Vinter's overthrow. Regardless, it seemed clear the present archduke held no grudge over his father's death—perhaps because that execution let him inherit his family's estates earlier rather than later. Laddermore had brought with him several seasoned mercenary companies that had long been in his employ—altogether more soldiers, knights, and warjacks than any of Vinter's other supporters.

Final preparations were underway for the grand feast to celebrate Vinter's return and his eventual restoration to the throne, but before the festivities could get underway the king excused himself. He gathered a small number of his key leaders and retired with them to a private chamber upstairs from the feast hall to discuss urgent plans.

Those asked to join him included Colonel Hawkins, General Deckley, Archduke Laddermore, Duke Dergeral, and a grizzled and tough-looking older man Hawkins did not at first recognize, one of the few at the gathering who was not dressed formally or in uniform. His bearing betrayed him as a military man, and his well-lined, leathery face suggested he spent a good portion of his time outside exposed to the elements, unlike nearly everyone else.

The way Vinter walked alongside him and listened to his whispers suggested considerable familiarity.

Once the doors were sealed, King Vinter turned to them and said, “He is known to several of you, but let me introduce Saxon Orrik, one of my most trusted advisors.” He indicated the man Hawkins had been studying. Many pieces fell in place in her mind. She had never met the man, but she knew of him—a former army ranger whose military career predated her own, stretching all the way back to Vinter III. He had suffered scandal and been forced out of the service but remained a legendary figure among those—like her—who had fought along the Khadoran border. Orrik had been known as a man who would go to any lengths to demoralize the enemy. Vinter said, “Orrik has been coordinating several vital aspects of my plans.”

Vinter waved for them to take their seats around the thick wooden table. “I will keep this brief. There are many uncertainties and variables in play that may determine our actions in the days ahead. I will be relying on each of you to be swiftly responsive to my orders. We must exploit every opportunity offered us. Do not be thrown by sudden changes. Rather, anticipate and exploit them. I will not accept excuses or failure.” He looked at each of their faces in turn.

Apparently unfazed, Archduke Laddermore said, “We all risk execution for treason to sit here with you, my king. Any weak links have been removed. The stakes could not be higher. We are eager to do your bidding.”

The king inclined his head and continued. “We have gathered an impressive force of arms, thanks to your dedication. It does not

go unnoticed. But make no mistake: even with the full control of Cygnar's Fourth Army, we are greatly outnumbered and outgunned by our enemies. Is that a fair assessment, General?"

Deckley shifted and said, "It is. Even with the forces gathered here by your loyal nobles, we are no match for any of Leto's three primary armies in open battle. For one thing, our access to warjacks is limited and includes primarily older machines with less advanced weaponry. We are also sorely lacking for warcasters"—his eye caught Hawkins and he gave her a small smile—"present company excepted. We all know the tactical importance of such individuals."

Vinter said, "We do have some additional support on that front. I have entered into an arrangement with a highly placed and ambitious military leader of the Protectorate of Menoth—Feora, Priestess of the Flame." It was clear as he said this who already knew this fact and who did not, as surprise was evident on the faces of Deckley and Dergeral, and certainly Hawkins herself was startled. Laddermore and Orrik clearly already knew.

Their king went on, "She has already proven useful, cooperating with Archduke Laddermore's people to eliminate several of Leto's supporters. Feora will initiate additional military actions in support of our efforts once we begin. Orrik, what is your level of confidence in the Priestess of Flame fulfilling her agreements?"

The old ex-ranger spoke in a gruff voice. "I think she will work with us, to a point. My people report she is mustering a substantial portion of her collective armed forces. At the very least they should serve to distract Caspia and the southern garrisons. I have less confidence they can be relied upon for an extended campaign. Once they begin to suffer casualties, expect them to withdraw.

Feora risks much, inviting retaliation from her hierarchy. She will not expend undue resources.”

Vinter nodded. He said, “Even with outside help, we cannot rely upon conventional military tactics and strength alone. Should my brother have time to rally any of Cygnar’s armies, or should he seal himself inside Caspia to await our approach, we will be defeated. Fortunately, a number of events have transpired that work to our advantage. The Third Army is needed to remain where it is, watching against Cryx. Our Protectorate friends will hopefully distract the Second Army. Most importantly, my brother has found his courage at last—after years of meekly hiding in my palace. He has left Caspia and traveled to visit the soldiers of the First Army in the north. This offers an unexpected opportunity.”

Duke Dergeral was toying with the signet ring on one of his thick fingers. He said, “I have heard from my spies that Leto was in Point Bourne until recently. He then joined a military column marching into the Thornwood. Some of my hastier peers proposed hiring an assassin to kill him while he was in the open, but Laddermore and I knew not to arrange anything like that without your permission.”

“You were wise to avoid that particular mistake,” Vinter said, his eyes narrowing.

Laddermore said, “Such a move would have been too much a gamble, as prone to backfire as to succeed, especially with the people Leto keeps around him.”

Vinter nodded. “Yes. While I have many criticisms of my brother, he would not be an easy mark for a hired killer, even a skilled one. An ill-timed attack would only make subsequent attempts less likely to succeed. Above all else, we must keep Leto from returning to the

City of Walls. So long as we can force a confrontation anywhere else, I am confident we can succeed. We need to close the noose while most of Leto's armed forces are occupied and unavailable."

General Deckley sighed and said, "Too bad about this alliance between Cygnar and Khador. Things looked a right mess before that. My people are in position, but they are few in number and most cannot be relied upon to sacrifice their lives in fights where they are outnumbered."

Laddermore steeped his fingers as he spoke. "In his speech before the Royal Assembly, Leto claimed he would go north to legitimize and strengthen this alliance. I believe he intended to meet Empress Vanar personally. He hoped to secure a longer peace."

Vinter frowned and a muscle in his cheek twitched. "On this matter, my brother is a fool. This so-called alliance will not last once the fighting against Cryx resolves. There is no greater hatred than the one between our two peoples. Only the horror of the walking dead gave unity. The First Army will be too preoccupied to help Leto if we choose our moment with care."

Hawkins had been listening closely. She knew it was dangerous to speak up among such company, but she had never let that stop her before. She said, "As soon as hostilities renew, Leto will withdraw south. He is cautious by nature. We should prepare an ambush along the Dragon's Tongue. We have sufficient manpower for something like that."

They were all quiet a moment, waiting for Vinter's reaction, but he remained still, watching them. Deckley spoke into the silence. "The Dragon's Tongue is a long stretch of river, Colonel. We can't know where he'll go. Point Bourne, Corvis, Stonebridge? Though

there are soldiers from the Fourth at each of those garrisons, we can't be everywhere in force."

After another pause, Vinter said, "Each of those places is a significant stronghold. As they stand it would not be strategically sound to tie up resources seizing and controlling any of them. That would pin our armies down and leave them vulnerable to retaliation. But we also cannot wait and react. We need to remain mobile. We must force our enemies to do as we require." He brooded on that and then smiled. Turning to the general, he said, "Deckley, your forces at Stonebridge. Withdraw them. Bring them to join our forces here."

The general looked puzzled. He said, "Give up that fortress entirely? It's a key position, Your Majesty. I have more soldiers there than elsewhere. It'd be the main place I'd expect Leto to go once trouble begins."

"Do you have enough men on the inside to seize control? Without alerting the rest of the Cygnaran chain of command?"

Deckley hesitated, then said, "Unfortunately, no. Taking it would be a real bear, and we'd lose a lot of men. We don't have loyal people on both sides of the bridge, for one thing. Most of my people are in the main fortress on the south shore."

"Withdraw them," Vinter said. "It will leave its remaining garrison in a state of confusion and pave the way for Khador. They won't be able to resist that lure. This can serve as the opening salvo I require to demonstrate to our discontented northern nobles their need of a stronger king to protect them."

"Very shrewd, Your Majesty," Duke Dergeral said with unfeigned admiration. "We will bait Khador into taking the prize and then

take it back from them.”

“This war will be about more than cornering my brother,” Vinter said, his voice rising. “There are many other actions to initiate. We must obscure our presence and our goals by having our people seize control across the northern region, arresting or eliminating any who would oppose us.” His intensity increased with every word. “There will be considerable turmoil and chaos. It will cause hardship for many. If there is one thing I learned in the east, it is that true strength comes only from suffering. This is not a time to coddle the weak. As we gather our army, let us also pave the way for the usurper’s downfall. This is not about one man, one traitor, but all of those who forgot their true king and in so doing brought Cygnar to the brink of ruin. We will lance the wound and expunge the poison, and in the aftermath, the kingdom can heal. But first we must drown our enemies in their own blood.”