

An hour later, drenched by cold rain and stinged by night chills, they were passing under the arch of the rear wicket. Soldiers, though accustomed to the winds and bad weathers of Carrosh, still trembled slightly and flinched from time to time on the backs of their horses. But not him. As he promised, in his heart and thoughts he carried a vivid memory of his son, and on his mouth, still intense, hot touch of Raelyn's sweet lips almost depriving him of breath back in the tower. The blessing. Ah, indeed, priests didn't have the smallest idea about proper blessings...

According to their plan, Tancred entrusted the walls to lord Skylark. The arctic fox came down to the courtyard with four of his people to honour the knight and his soldiers departing to the battle. Every now and then moonlight pierced through the clouds, reflecting in his alabaster fur. The accents on his muzzle, tips of his ears and tail, harmonized with the black, matt anima he was wearing, made him look more like a navy officer than a knight. From under the faulds of cuirass and taces with the color of the anthracite flashed rings of a light chainmail. The pauldrons were asymmetrical, left one a bit more massive than the right one. Balan Skylark didn't like, when armor limited mobility.

"Go and return victorious, Tancred. Burn their arses!" He called out.

"Thank you, lord Balan. That's the plan," answered the wolf turning his horse. "Carrosh is yours."

"Steel Song and its knights are with you. I regret we cannot ride side by side."

"Small glory in crushing mercenaries."

"But what a great workout! And satisfaction, Tancred. Stay well!" trying to outvoice the screech of the gate and the downpour, lord Balan bid him farewell.

"This problem will perish, before the dawn rises," ensured the wolf disappearing in depths of the night. Column of the main forces followed after him almost noiselessly. Like a lethal steel-snake.

"How right you are, sir Tancred. Everything settles in the dark."

Together with his people he watched the cavalry disappearing in the small gate. They had to pass slowly, one by one, and avoid any excessive noise, so it took a while, before the last soldier abandoned the confines of the walls. The downpour came downward unexpected, just as the mercenaries. Now it was proving itself very fortunate, as it effectively diminished all the possibly betraying sounds.

When teeth of the cast iron bars bite into the ground, Balan turned to the castle, to find shelter under the roof of wooden arcades leaned against the keep's wall.

"Lorne?"

"Yes, my lord?" answered his subordinate, a fox, like himself. Steel Song was settled in the proper, frosty uplands of the principedom. In Skylarks forces served many foxes, bears and wolves.

"Relieve the guards on this side of the walls. They are to move to the front gate. With them out of here, raise the bars and wait. Keep quiet."

"As you wish, sir."

He himself climbed the stairs and headed to his chamber. In comparison with the piercing cold outside, even the old defensive section of the castle seemed warm and hospitable. But the downpour and winds never impressed Balan. Wouldn't impress anybody, who had ever spent winter in the Steel Song. The South was soft and warm. Comfortable. The North, on the other hand... was completely different place. Severe and cold. Verily cold. But it's cruelty wore parlay a magnificent face. And a mysterious one. Songs and poems spoke about it, spoke the people of all species. Spoke everyone, who witnessed. And then, there were things and places hidden high in the mountains, known only to very few. Forsaken, ancient sanctuaries guarding something more, than only the dust of ages. And in everyone's best interest was, it stayed that way.

Balan entered the room, assigned to him by the counters after his arrival, a week earlier. After the doorlock clanged, every eye rested upon him. Two dozens of his people were crowded in, an otherwise pretty large chamber. Some had been waiting there already for several hours. He greeted them with the grimace that induced even bears to look away.

"Listen to me well, cause I want to settle this quickly..." And he gave them his orders. After that, they dismissed to fulfill their duties, leaving him alone in the spacious room. Alone to marvel at fire frisking in the hearth. Accompanying it, on candle's tops, slender, little flamy dancers swung its hips in delicate wafts of wind. The lord however, was only staring at them, paying no true attention, deep in thoughts about his presentiment and concern. There was no trace of them on his face. They were hidden. Deeply, together with all the feelings. That's what Balan Skylark would always do. Being a fox made it easier. All the time however he had this... presentiment. He did not like to have presentiments. They were stupid, seldom turned out true and didn't have any practical use. Completely not in his style. But he couldn't keep away the thought that something would go wrong. *But I don't have a choice...*

Minutes dragged on slowly, and the concern grew in him with every burnt-out inch of candles. At last Balan arose from the chair and began to walk around the table, not capable of focusing his eyes on anything in particular; nor the fire in the hearth, nor the floral ornaments of arrases adorning the tone walls of the old castle. Suddenly a noise behind the door reached his ears and a moment later, after silent knocking, countess Raelyn entered the chamber.

"Forgive me, lord Skylark," she greeted him, all abroad, as soon as the guard closed the door. "I'm anxious..."

"Of course, I will keep you company, lady," he declared, sincerely glad he didn't have to sit there alone anymore.

"Thank you."

They sat at the table together and Raelyn ordered the servants to bring wine. It didn't escape Balan's attention how her hands were shaking, when she raised the calyx to her mouth.

"Such nervousness is unhealthy, my lady," he started with a calm voice.

"I know, Balan," she answered forcing a smile. He replied with a similar caricature on his muzzle, and that only gave him an impression that they both felt only worse afterwards. "Maybe wine will help me calm down."

"How is your son feeling?"

Raelyn smiled, this time more naturally.

"I left him with a servant. He's asleep now. Actually he's either asleep or eating."

"You are lucky then," Balan smiled, "I remember how Gareth was. He had been giving maids a hard time. Couldn't fell asleep for longer than four hours. His screams and crying could have been heard in the entire castle," he shook his white head, smiling. It often dawned upon him, that the reason was lack of contact with mother. He tried the best he could to stand in for her, but he had lost her too, after all. And he couldn't have been sure, whether he wouldn't reject his son out of grief, weren't it for his oath. That has been a difficult time.

"I can imagine," the wolfess pulled him out of his reverie, "Fortunately neither Arianne, nor Wenzel cause any big hassles."

"Your lord husband took her to Dalarenz. Isn't she too small for such journey?"

"Only four springs behind her," agreed Raelyn, "but she makes him smile so much more that I just couldn't refuse. She would never forgive me anyway. And what wouldn't we do for our children?" She asked, looking straight into his eyes with a gentle smile.

As they sat there and talk about their offsprings, just like that, like an old friends, he almost forgot where they were and what was happening. However, Raelyn's question stung him with a pang of guilt. He only nodded in answer, without saying a word. *Well... exactly! What wouldn't we do for our children?*

"Something happened?"

He flinched on these words.

"No, not at all... I just... thought it has to be hard for you, my lady. Count Murtagh is far away, and your son is in danger all of a sudden." He knew that these words will wipe the smile out of her face. Even felt relief, when that happened.

The wolfess sighed.

"It's true. No matter how thick, how high the walls are, and how many soldiers guard them. The dread is always there... Eventually, it turned out only for the best that Arianne accompanies Murtagh in his voyage to Dalarenz. Oh, the irony..."

Balan raised his ears intrigued.

"I am afraid that I do not understand, lady."

Counters Raelyn looked at him demurely.

"While it is still a matter of a great confidence, I know that my husband intends to share it with you. So I as well may be the one, who will tell you the news."

"You can trust me with your secrets, my lady," Skylark lowered his head in respect. Or maybe it was inability to look her in the eyes while he said that.

"Murtagh took Arianne to Dalarenz, to introduce her to prince Craven. As you very well know, princess van Andern also gave birth to her son recently."

"Yes... and little prince Nolan is the only heir of the crown."

"My husband for a long time now procured the connection of our family with the princely house. Finally the opportunity occurred. Prince Craven granted his agreement on the engagement."

Balan Skylark didn't have to ask about their urgency in this endeavours.

"I understand. The count wants to maintain his strong position."

"Thanks to this move we will be stronger than ever."

"The prince too... Van Anderns will gain new feudalities." *Maybe even more than they suppose.* Inwardly he smiled. But that was bitter smile. *Now that's the irony...*

"Technically it will be the capital province, not their inherited lands, but that's true, they will," confirmed counters Dormer.

After that they both fell silent. Skylark wondered over what he heard. In the light of plots already in motion, machinations of Murtagh and Craven would most possibly lead to the crumbling of Dormer's influences. Making efforts to strengthen the ties with van Andern's, the count unknowingly had put his house on the way to the exact opposite. Skylark couldn't foresee what that meant for the Steel Song and his own family. Cogwheels of that hellish machine once set to motion, were no longer to stop. Everyone had to play their part. Now came his own little act and he didn't feel any guilt, nor sorrow. He knew the price he was going to pay. He only hoped he will get enough time before that happens...

At that very moment they heard some turmoil behind the door. Counters Raelyn immediately arose from her chair. Balan got up too, but noticeably calmer. Just after that a soldier stormed into the room. His leather armor was smeared with mud and blood, and the expression on his muzzle told them everything, even before he opened his muzzle.

"Lady!" he exclaimed desperately, falling on his knees before her. "It was an ambush! We were crushed!"

Wolfess wasn't even able to catch a breath.

"How come?!" asked Skylark. "Report!" From under the mud, wet, cream labrador's fur was visible.

"They prepared an ambush in the forest, my lord! We barely rode further 'mongst the trees... they jumped out of darkness, like demons... entire troop's butchered... they're coming!" the dog panted.

"Tancred?" Raelyn choked out with trembling voice.

"We've lost him."

"No..." she clutched the table, to not fall under the shattering weight of these news. In her eyes the tears appeared.

"HOW MANY?!" Skylark shook the labrador violently.

"Forgive me my lord, but it was impossible to tell with this onslaught around..." groaned the wounded soldier.

Balan noticed horror-struck faces of the guards standing in the doorway after hearing this news. Counters Raelyn stood frozen in some nightmarish trauma, but he didn't have the time to care.

"My lady, I will not hold the castle!" he grasped Raelyn hoping to sober her up. "We have to leave immediately!"

"Leave?" she asked, looking at him absently with bleary eyes. There was something overwhelming in this look.

*Do not think.*

"We are escaping, lady Raelyn, there's no time!"

She flinched and Balan could see her lucidity returning.

"Y-yes... yes, we are... We have to be going! Please, send for Wenzel. I'm not going anywhere without my son!"

"There is no time, my lady. Besides, it's wiser to separate you and your son until we lose the chase."

"What chase?"

"I'm afraid, my lady, you and your little son are the targets of the enemy. But it's no time for investigating. Quick! My people will protect you, I will bring your son myself with the rest of my guards," he ensured her.

"I believe, you're right, lord Balan, but how will he endure that?" she insisted.

"Raelyn, I'd raised my own son alone, he'll be safe with me!" he almost shouted at her, looking straight into those terrified eyes. She fell silent for a moment, and just after, with surprising strength, she grasped him by the collar of his cuirass.

"You have to promise. I hear wisdom in your words, but promise me!"

"I promise! Trust me." He replied, somewhat surprised. She only nodded and the moment later he was left alone with the labrador soldier.

"You can get up now," he said to the dog, lending him a hand.

"How are you feeling, my lord?"

Balan shrugged and approached his traveling chest. *How am I supposed to feel?* "Dishonourably..." he stated at least.

"I'm sorry, sir..."

"You said that before. Here, put this on," he threw him a cloak. A moment later the soldier disappeared under the gray linen fabric.

"My lord..." began the dog, his voice filled with uncertainty, "You are not the only one... the only one guilty..."

The fox sighed and covered his forehead with his paw. "I know I asked more of you, than any master would ever have a right to..."

"That's not what I want to say, sir," the labrador interrupted. "I want to say... that I know you had no other choice. I understand. And without hesitation I will accept my part of any possible disgrace, that will be descended upon you. Without hesitation I will defy everyone calling you a traitor. I know you, my lord, and to the death I will claim that you're an honorable and just man."

"However, not clever enough. Apparently..." smiled Balan sadly. "As much as I'm touched with your loyalty, I won't let you do that for me," he said, embracing the dog's arms. "I have another order for you... no. Not an order. A request."

"I'm listening, my lord."

"You had always been a faithful friend and a good servant, Kegan. I thank you for this and for all that you have ever done for me. It's possible I won't have the opportunity, so... I want you to take these two documents," he said, showing him two tubular, leather cases.

"Of course."

"In the larger is an act bestowing the protectorate over Steel Song and all adjacent domains. There's your name in it."

"Sir..." mumbled Kegan, shocked.

"Please. I wish you to rule, till the time Gareth grows up. And therefore, please, take care of him. Guide him. Teach him how to fight, teach him policy, diplomacy... You have all the traits of a good steward and commander."

The dog fell silent. For a moment both of them said nothing, but at last Kegan dropped his ears and tail in downhearted understanding. He had to agree. Refusing, he would end letting his lord die in anxiety about his lands and house. In his life of servitude that was the last and the greatest responsibility to claim.

"I... I accept your request, my lord."

Visibly relieved, Balan turned his glance at the flames dancing in the hearth.

"Many people will talk and... many bad things will be heard about me. Tell Gareth about all of this. Tell him the whole truth. I can't stand the vision of him loathing me."

He made a pause to swallow the lump that appeared in his throat all of a sudden. It mattered not how much time he had to come to terms with his fate. Kegan sat tight until Skylark found it in his heart to face the servant again.

"When you see fit... give him this. My last words to him. He is too young to understand now. This is my last request," said Balan Skylark, handing his servant the second, smaller case.

"I will fulfill your request to a hair, my lord. My friend."

"Thank you. And now..." Balan approached the door. "Ride as fast as you can. Abandon the road as soon as possible. Leave trails for the chase. Draw their attention. Lead our troops to the rendezvous and wait for me there till the sun rises. I will come with the boy."

Having that said, fox nodded him farewell, and Kegan, hooding himself, disappeared in the dark corridor. Skylark once again looked into the fire.

*Strange*, he thought. *Now, as this has already begun, I am calm.* And he walked out of the chamber, to do what he had to.