

You will not hold the fortress, Mark,' Berger turned from the window and slowly walked to the table where lieutenant Mark Tavi stood. 'Skanja will fall. You know that, don't you?'

The commander was looking at the maps and reconnaissance reports laid on the table. What was he to say? That yes, he knows that? That such wave of forces cannot be opposed? That the stronghold will fall in two days, three days at best? That everything is lost already? Yes, he knew that - they both did. In a few days the hordes of orcs will pour in and slaughter everyone who stands in their way. What was left to say? About soldier's duty? Or about courage and honor, all that talk we are all here responsible for the whole Agaria? That we have lived for this very moment, the moment of glory? These few days that are coming will decide on how we will be described in the chronicles. You could waste your life on meaningless acts, you could be drunkard, a rake, a nobody; yet now it is the moment to change it all. Stand on the walls. Endure. Stand on the walls and fight the enemy off for as long as possible. Stand on the walls and earn your place in history.

He would save these words for soldiers and they would have to believe in the impossible and fight for Skanja. But here and now these words were meaningless. He and Berger had known each other for years. They didn't have to say anything. They just knew it all.

'This is the stronghold of Bari,' the commander pointed to a place on the map. 'The messengers headed there an hour ago. Bari will prepare itself for defense, send their runners out and signal the rest. They will organize the defense.' Tavi raised his head and looked at his friend. 'You will gather all women and children and then head west for Bari at the break of dawn. They will be safe there.'

He asked for much. Berger was the best swordsman Tavi had ever met; the best friend he had ever had and the bravest of men that had fought beside Tavi. Berger was the man, who - Tavi was ready to believe that - would stand on the walls alone and defend Skanja from the wave of troops from Valdor. He also was a *Ragadan*, a man from the far East. It was not Berger's war, he did not take his pay here, he

even hadn't taken the soldier's oath here. He was here only because of Tavi. And now Berger was to be sent away against his will, against his intentions to defend the stronghold to the very end with no intentions to retreat or stand down but to fight here side by side with his commander.

'I will not baby-sit women, commander.' Berger stressed the last word. 'Send someone else from the castle troops with them. You've got many other men.'

'But I'm asking you.'

'And I refuse.'

'And I do not accept your refusal' You will leave at dawn.' Tavi wanted to sound firm, but failed: you simply can't deceive your friend with grimace. He sat at the table and hid his face in his hands.

'Berger, do not make it harder for me. I know you want to stay here and get slain with all of us, and you know I can't let you do it. Take your Ragadian pride with you out of here. Drink one for me in Bari. No need for us both dying here.'

'But...'

'Berger, please. These people have to be escorted to Bari. I need someone who can handle it.'

Outside, the bugle played, short and determined. The enemy was on the horizon. So, they moved at us. Tavi still hoped that the invader's army moves north, to Bari and Calm. But that did not happen. They were heading straight for Skanja, hoping for an easy prey.

'Mark, it's seven days for such a caravan' Berger was inspecting the maps. 'These people will never reach Bari. The invaders will fall over them on the way. I will be of no help there.'

'What should I do then? Sit and wait until they all get slaughtered here?'

Silence fell in the room. Finally, Berger spoke:

'You must hold them here for six, seven days.'

'Seven' said Mark.

'What?'

'Seven days. I will give you seven days. You will make it to Bari. You will save the people and help building defenses there' said Mark.

And so it happened. The convoy of women and children was leaving Skanja. Far in the distance, at the front of the column was Berger, circling from left to right and back and giving his last orders. The Ragadian's coat fluttered on the wind. Tavi watched him all from the window of his chamber. He waited for that one last glance, a nod from his friend, a sign of saying goodbye, but it was in vain. Berger did not look at the stronghold even once. The column set off.

So this is how it ends. Without even a word or a handshake. Tavi watched the horizon with empty eyes. It was not what he had imagined. They exchanged only few words the previous evening. Berger had coolly said goodbye and walked off to his chamber. They did not meet in the morning.

The Ragadian accepted the plea to leave in much worse manner than Tavi had expected. He knew, of course, that Berger would hate to retreat from the castle and that the Ragadian wanted to be here, in Skanja, to fight and die with Tavi. He knew it all but expected a different reaction from Berger: screaming, yes, cursing and fury, most surely, and accepting the inevitable in the end. Skanja would fall. Tavi would die. Berger couldn't help here. They both knew it. Tavi was prepared that his friend would break into rage, but that didn't happen. Prepared for fighting, insults, which did not appear either. Tavi was prepared for a goodbye evening with a flask of spirit on the table, but eventually he spent it alone in his chamber and musing about the past.

Everything went wrong. He and Berger had faced death many times. It looked like it's their last hour six years back Barosz village, where they were ambushed by orcs. Their squadron had been surrounded, decimated and with no chances of survival. It had been the exact moment for a man to look deeply in his companion's eyes, nod his head wisely and jump into the plaza to meet certain death. And so they did, shooting their pistols, shouting and fighting. What had followed was that miraculous victory, the broken formation of the orcs and the immense relief. They had cheated death.

It also seemed like that their last hour time came later on, during the siege of Tija, when two bolts whizzed next to Tavi and hit Berger's chest, jackknifing him

on the ground like a ragdoll. Tavi stood there, roaring like a lion and holding the enemy at bay. He did not retreat even half a step despite the pressure of invaders, yet he knew that time was running, life was leaking from Berger with every second. Hold on Berger, don't you dare leaving me!' shouted Tavi, fought like three men, and begged his friend in thoughts to endure, not to give up, to wait for help. And it did arrived, luckily on time. The Ragadian was dragged away from the grip of death.

It looked like their last hour came the last winter when they set off scouting with a small group of men and got lost. That evening they drank last draught of spirit, looked at each other and nodded their heads, smiling. If he would ever want to die, it would have been only on the evening like this, with his friend by his side, a bottle of vodka within reach and a smile on their faces. Yet they had been lucky and cheated death once again.

And now it was the end of it. Berger left Skanja. In a few days Tavi would fall under the blows of orcs. There would be no hand shakes, nobody to send last glance to, nobody to thank for these years of friendship. It wasn't meant to be like this at all.

The column disappeared from sight and Tavi walked away from the window eventually. He felt awful.

'Stano!' Tavi hollered at his aide. 'Bring me some wine.'

No one answered.

'Stano!' he shouted again.

'Stano's gone,' said a voice from the door. Tavi knew that voice all too well. He spun around. 'Stano is escorting the column.'

Berger stood in the door to the chamber.

'I gave him my coat,' Berger explained and put a bottle of wine on the table.

'But...' Tavi was still pointing his finger at the window.

'I'm sure that you want to say 'Thank you', 'I apologize' or 'Good to see you' Berger approached the window and looked at the soldiers bustling around on the courtyard. Tavi was silent for a moment, but finally joined his friend.

'Thank you. I apologize. Good to see you'.

