
CHAPTER ONE

Alturiak, 1370 DR

Corin felt them before he saw them, felt them just as sure as he had felt the coming storm that had been raining down on them for the last hour. After a year of working for Igland's White Shields, escorting dozens upon dozens of caravans between Elversult and Iriabor, he had developed a sixth sense for these things.

Thunder broke overhead, and lightning illuminated the landscape for a brief second. Corin saw nothing out of the ordinary, but still he *knew*. He held up a clenched fist and pulled his mount up short. Behind him the other nine members of the White Shield Company did the same. Corin wasn't their official leader, but the others in the company respected him for his skill with a blade and his composure in the heat of battle. Despite his youth, they knew to trust his instincts; that was why Igland had him riding point.

The passenger coach that the Shields surrounded ground to a halt as well, and the door flew open. Fhazail's fat form rolled out from the carriage, a broad umbrella spread above to keep the downpour from ruining his fashionable courtier's clothes.

"What's going on here?" he wheezed to Igland, Captain of the White Shields.

“Something’s not right,” Iglan answered. “Get back inside before the trouble hits.”

Fhazail peered about, his beady eyes squinting through the storm. “I don’t see anything except rain clouds. Are you telling me you’re afraid of a little thunder and lightning?”

“Bandits,” Corin said in a low voice. “Nearby. They’ll hit us any minute.”

“Impossible!” Fhazail sputtered, his jowls quivering. “How could you know that?” Turning from Corin, he addressed the captain, nervously twisting one of the heavy gold rings on his right hand, rotating the gemstone set into the face completely around his sausagelike finger. “You told me a small group of armed soldiers wouldn’t attract attention, you promised we’d be safe if we went with your company!” His eyes narrowed even farther as he cast suspicious glances at the armed men surrounding him. “I could have hired fifty soldiers to protect Lord Harlaran’s son, but you convinced me to use your small company instead!”

It was untrue, of course. Fhazail had chosen the White Shields because they were a fraction of the cost of hiring a full merchant escort. Corin suspected the steward had informed Lord Harlaran that he was hiring a virtual army to escort his son, then pocketed the difference. The gaudy jewelry on his right hand was matched by equally ostentatious, and expensive, rings on his right.

“Captain,” Fhazail added in a softer voice, “did you betray me?”

Iglan’s reply was stiff and cold. “The White Shields are not traitors.”

“Everyone’s a traitor for the right price,” Fhazail returned, rubbing his double chin and eyeing Corin in particular.

Iglan ignored the insinuation. “There’s always bandits

on the Trader Road, Corin just has a sixth sense for when they will attack.”

Corin returned Fhazail’s glare and said, “They probably don’t even know who the boy’s father is—kidnapping and ransom are likely the last things on their minds. They’d attack just for those bands of gold around your fingers, and the satisfaction of slitting our throats.”

Fhazail was about to reply when a single arrow buried itself in the soft earth just inches from his feet. He stared down in surprise, then scampered back into the coach as several more shot into the wooden roof of the carriage. Suddenly the dark sky was filled with missiles launched from the hidden bandits’ bows, falling down on Corin and the others like the rain that had drenched them for the past hour. The driver of the coach leaped down from his unprotected seat and squeezed his way inside the carriage over the protests of Fhazail. Rain was one thing, a storm of arrows was quite another.

Most of the arrows landed harmlessly on the ground. Some would have fallen on the men and their mounts as they closed ranks, but they threw up their painted broad shields, for which they were named, over their heads to catch the deadly projectiles. The few that made it past the soldiers’ shield canopy bounced harmlessly off their mailed shirts.

Moments later a second volley landed with similar ineffective results. The bandits attacked, a ragtag collection of twenty or so humans on foot, with the odd orc and goblin thrown in for good measure. They appeared all at once, pouring out from behind the hillocks and mounds that lined the road, screaming with battle lust as they formed a disorganized horde in the middle of the Trader Road.

Corin knew the arrows had been merely a decoy, a chance for the robbers to close the distance between

themselves and the caravan, negating the chance of a wizard wiping out the whole band with a single spell of mass destruction. However, there were no wizards in Igland's company. His men preferred the honest strength of forged steel and a well-trained sword arm.

As a single unit Igland's men charged forward through the downpour, lowering their heavy lances in unison. Their mounts splashed through the puddles in the road, churning up great clods of mud in their wake. Foolishly the bandits kept rushing head on, gathered in a tight little group in the center of the road as if they wanted to be ground under the heavy hooves of the war-horses.

Corin braced his lance in the stirrup and with his free hand wiped the rain from his forehead. He relished the coming slaughter—for slaughter it would be. Most of their foes would be trampled beneath the initial charge, the survivors would be run down by the riders even as they fled back into the hills. It was almost too simple.

Through the darkness of the storm and the torrential rains none of them ever saw the trip wires stretched across the road. The front runners went down, the horses flipping and twisting as the ropes entangled their legs, the riders tossed from their mounts to land with stunning force on the road before them, their heavy lances torn from their grasp and sent hurtling through the air. The second rank was too close behind them to pull up, and another set of snares sent them tumbling to the soaked earth in a chaotic mass of beasts and men sliding through the mud. The weight of their armor dragged the soldiers down, momentarily pinning them to the ground, unable to evade the final rank of riders, unhorsing them as well and spreading the carnage through all of Igland's company. The rhythmic thunder of charging hooves disintegrated into the cacophony of crashing armor, neighing horses, and screaming men.

Corin was thrown from his horse, miraculously landing uninjured in the soft mud. But even as he tried to roll to the side he was swept up in the chaos, carried along by the force of the charge, swallowed up by the rolling, crashing herd of dying men and animals. Limbs were crushed and skulls were trampled or kicked in by the iron shoes of the fallen horses; the mounts shrieked neighs of terror and pain as leg bones splintered and were ground to dust by the onslaught of their own mass and momentum.

The soldiers lay strewn about the road. Several bodies were mangled, limbs jutting out at unnatural angles, compound fractures protruding through skin or bulging obscenely beneath their mailed suits of armor. The horses lay beside their masters, kicking and thrashing in blind agony, as lethal to their owners now as they had been to their enemies in glorious battles of the past.

Corin crawled clear of the fallen men and writhing mounts and rose hastily to his feet. He had suffered no worse than bumps and bruises, though he had lost both his shield and lance in the fall. Somehow his sword was still in its scabbard, strapped to his side. Through the rain he noticed several other forms struggle to their feet, maybe half a dozen in all, to face the coming assault.

Corin didn't even have time to draw his weapon before the bandits fell on them. A goblin charged at him, waving a cruel looking short sword above his head. Corin lunged forward, colliding with his onrushing assailant and catching his attacker by surprise. On the wet ground footing was unsure, and the goblin bowled Corin over. As he fell Corin grabbed his attacker in a bear hug, dragging his startled adversary down with him. They struggled together, rolling through the muck as Corin tried to use his size and strength to gain the upper hand. The goblin stabbed with short, ineffective strokes, unable to put

enough force into the blows to pierce Corin's armor in such close quarters.

A second goblin raced over to join in the fray, eager to strike a blow, looking for a clear shot at Corin. Corin made sure that shot never came, twisting and turning so that the first goblin's body was always between himself and this new opponent. The second goblin danced around the pair as they wrestled in the mud, slipping and sliding as he waited for an opening. Finally he gave up and began hacking indiscriminately at the tangled pair.

The first goblin screamed as his companion's blade bit deep into his back, severing the spinal cord. In one smooth motion Corin, still lying beneath the twitching body of his opponent, wrenched the short sword free from the now paralyzed hand of his first attacker and used it to slash at the unprotected leg of the second goblin hovering over them. The sword bit deep into the flesh, slicing through the tendon. With a howl the goblin collapsed on the ground, bringing his exposed throat within range of Corin's next blow. Corin did not miss.

He then rolled the paralyzed first goblin off him and dispatched his now helpless enemy with a single blow. He scrambled to his feet and pulled out his own long sword, quickly surveying the battle scene. Several figures were moving cautiously through the fallen bodies of the horses and soldiers. Orcs, likely, looking to finish off the wounded and steal some small trinket from the dead that they could keep hidden from the rest of the gang. Several more robbers had surrounded the carriage, preventing any chance of escape for the driver, Fhazail and the nobleman's young son.

Corin's brothers-in-arms, the four that were still standing, were on the defensive. They stood on the far side of the road, back to back in a small circle, swords weaving tight patterns in the air as they held their enemies

momentarily at bay. Through the gloom of the storm Corin could make out several fallen bandits at the feet of his friends, and he recognized the distinctive armor of Iglad among the four still standing. His companions faced overwhelming odds, completely surrounded by at least a dozen armed opponents who were only waiting for the reinforcements to finish their looting of Corin's fallen comrades before they moved in.

Corin sprinted across the road, his feet skidding across the wet earth, brandishing his blade above his head and screaming his battle lust to the broiling thunderclouds overhead. Several of the bandits spun to meet Corin's charge, turning their backs on the four soldiers in the middle of the pack. The soldiers acted instinctively, moving as one—the result of years of training and drills—attacking the suddenly exposed backs of their opponents.

Before the rest of the bandits could even react, four of their number lay dead or dying, and the soldiers had broken free of the confining circle. A second later Corin joined the battle, and the bandits found themselves being pressed on two fronts. With a single command from Iglad the White Shields took the offensive.

Corin waded through the rabble of poorly equipped bandits, easily parrying the unskilled slashes and swipes of their rusty swords and returning them with lethally effective cuts and thrusts of his own finely wrought weapon. He carved a swath through his opponents, mowing them down like so much grain at the harvest, then turned for another pass.

In his peripheral vision he noticed his companions wreaking similar havoc on their incompetent foes. The bandits—disorganized, untrained cowards at heart—scattered beneath the fury of the White Shields' wrath. Corin took a step after them, but pulled up short when he heard Iglad's voice shouting above the storm.

“Let them go, Corin! We have to protect the boy.”

Corin turned his attention back to the carriage. The horses had been unhitched, leaving the carriage stranded in the road. The coach driver lay face down on the ground, motionless. Corin could make out the fleshy mountain of Fhazail through the carriage window, and another figure as well. It was too large to be Lord Har-laran’s son, Corin assumed it was one of the robbers. He prayed the bandit was just tying Fhazail and the boy up, and not slitting their throats.

A half-dozen men stood near the coach, prepared for battle. From the way they held their weapons Corin could tell these were not the untrained fodder he had just dispatched with such ease, but experienced mercenaries. A second later the men were joined by four figures slinking in from the darkness—the orcs had finished their looting, and were now ready to fight.

“Ten against five,” Igland muttered. “I like our chances.”

There was no mad rush forward this time. Both parties knew a foolish mistake would mean certain death. The White Shields advanced slowly in a loose formation, the bandits spreading out as they approached. Igland barked a command, and Corin and one of the other soldiers slid back a step to guard against anyone trying to flank them.

For a brief second they faced each other—highway robbers and hired guards, buffeted by the howling wind and driving rain of the raging tempest.

From the carriage Fhazail’s voice called out in a blubbery whine, “The leader tells me that if you throw down your weapons they’ll let us all live. All they want is to ransom the boy. They don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Igland gave a contemptuous laugh. “Even you aren’t gullible enough to believe that, are you Fhazail? The only

one they care about is the boy. The rest of us are nothing but dragon meat to them. This ends in one of two ways, with their deaths or ours.”

There was nothing more to say, the battle began. Iglund’s men pressed forward, maintaining their loose formation. The bandits held their ground, but Corin could already tell they weren’t used to fighting as a unit. Though outnumbering their foes, the bandits weren’t able to coordinate their efforts. They took turns engaging the soldiers, attacking, thrusting and parrying before falling back to allow another man to move in for a pass.

The strange, hypnotic rhythm of combat began to take hold of the bandits: advance, attack, parry, retreat, switch. They became predictable. After repelling only a few offensives Corin already knew all the moves of the two men facing him, knew how to counter their every blow. He picked up the rhythms of one of his foes—advance, attack, parry—but when the bandit tried to disengage, Corin was ready. Leaping forward he brought his sword in low and quick, forcing his opponent to take a hasty step back, throwing him off balance. Before he could recover Corin reversed the path of his sword with a flick of his wrist and a turn of his body and brought the blade in high. The bandit had to twist and lean back to avoid the blow causing him to stumble awkwardly on the slippery ground. Using both hands Corin slashed down in a diagonal arc. The bandit parried the blow, but the force nearly knocked the sword from his hand and deflected the bandit’s own blade downward, leaving his chest exposed. Corin thrust forward, felt the point of his weapon penetrate the mail shirt, pierce the breastbone, and run deep into the chest cavity of his opponent. The entire sequence had taken less than a second.

Corin wrenched his sword free from his dying enemy to catch the wild stroke of his second foe. He had left

himself vulnerable in finishing off the first bandit, but his remaining opponent had been too slow to capitalize on it—just as Corin knew he would. Corin kicked out with his boot, landing a sharp blow to the bandit's knee. The leg crumpled for a brief second, and as the bandit's weight slumped forward Corin brought the hilt of his sword crashing into the man's jaw, sending him reeling back, his arms pinwheeling to keep his balance as his weapon slipped from his grasp. Corin bounded after his foe. Somehow he managed to keep his footing through the muck and mire that used to be the road, his sword carving wide sweeping arcs through the air at belt level, each swipe a few inches closer to the madly retreating bandit than the one before. After three passes Corin made contact, slicing a shallow incision through both armor and skin. The fourth pass bit deep into the bandit's stomach, ripping a savage gash through his midriff. Corin spun to face the rest of the battle even as the dying man clutched at the intestines and blood pouring out of his ruptured stomach.

Two other bandits were down, orcs, both of them dispatched by Igland. The other soldiers were holding their own, and Corin could see it was only a matter of time before the victory was theirs. Before Corin could re-join the melee he noticed Igland on the far side of the battlefield gesturing frantically at the carriage.

A single orc had emerged from the coach—the figure Corin had noticed through the window. It was hitching the horses back up and getting ready to ride off with Fhazail and the boy while the others kept the White Shields occupied.

Corin and Igland raced toward the lone figure. Igland was closer, he reached the wagon just as the orc finished hitching the horses up. The orc turned to face him, drawing its sword. The blade glowed faintly in the darkness.

Corin was on the far side of the battle, he had to weave his way through the soldiers and bandits still locked in combat to reach his goal, floundering through the mud. He ducked to avoid a wild blow by one of the bandits as he raced by, but lost his balance and landed unceremoniously on his backside. Luckily his momentum carried him past the fray, sliding through the ooze like he used to do as a child after the spring rains turned the untilled fields into one giant mud pit.

He scrambled back to his feet and saw Iglan writhing on the ground, his hands clutching at a stump that used to be his left leg. The orc towered over the fallen leader of the White Shields, relishing its opponent's suffering for a brief instant before raising its glowing blade above its head. No!" Corin screamed, too far to help but close enough to hear the sound of metal hacking through helmet and bone as the orc brought the killing blow down on Iglan's skull.

The orc looked up from its victim to face its new opponent. Its shoulders were broad and powerful, its bare arms knotted by muscle and sinew. Its massive chest was covered with black chain armor, its legs were covered to the knee by a kilt of black iron links, and below the knee by heavy black boots. Its head was covered by a black iron skullcap, and its eyes glowed with hate and evil from below the helm. Corin was close enough now to pierce the gloom and stare directly into the hate filled gaze. *Up* into the hate filled gaze. The orc towered over Corin, by far the biggest he had ever seen.

"Orog," Corin whispered to himself.

A genetically superior race of orc, some said. A hideous cross breed of orc and ogre, others insisted. Corin had heard of these creatures, but had never faced one before. It brought its huge sword up with both hands—the blade was a foot longer than Corin's own and at least twice as

thick—and stood poised in this position, boots sinking ever so slightly into the rain-softened ground.

Corin approached cautiously, sizing up his opponent. The stance was unorthodox, yet Corin sensed it was not a sign of inexperience. His opponent stood motionless as Corin moved in, its sword dripping with blood and rain, glowing faintly with its own eerie light. Corin didn't need to see the etchings on the blade to know it was a weapon of evil magic.

Corin lunged forward, a quick feint, then drew back. The orog brought the blade straight down, as if chopping wood. Corin easily avoided the blow, but before he could regain his balance on the slick earth and counter, the orog was already in the process of delivering another stroke. Corin gave ground and parried with his own blade. The heavy sword struck his own, sending shock waves of vibration through Corin's sword arm. A heavy boot caught him in the chest and knocked him onto his back, but he rolled to the side and avoided a lethal strike. He sprang to his feet, but the orog had already recovered and was launching a new assault. Corin slipped and staggered back, ducking and dodging the fierce blade as it ripped through the air. The fury of the orog's onslaught kept him off balance, leaving him completely on the defensive, unable to even attempt any type of counter attack.

Yet even as he was being all but overrun by his opponent, Corin knew he had the advantage. He continued to retreat, splashing through puddles and drawing the orog ever closer to the main battle, and farther and farther away from the prisoners and the coach he intended to use as an escape. Soon, Corin knew his friends would finish off the bandits and come to join him, overwhelming the orog with their coordinated efforts.

Suddenly the orog paused, an uncertain look on its repulsive, rain drenched face. It stared for a brief second at

the figures engaged in combat over Corin's shoulder, watching as the last two bandits fell beneath the blades of three White Shields acting in concert. Then it cast a quick glance back at the carriage, seeming to realize the predicament it was in. Corin took the opportunity to lunge forward with his sword. At the last second the orog reacted to the thrust, turning to the side to avoid the blade and driving a burly shoulder into Corin's chest, sending him stumbling to the ground. But rather than finish Corin off and then face the three remaining soldiers, the orog turned and began a loping run back to the coach.

Corin followed, and heard the battle cries of his companions behind him as they rushed to catch up. The orog's size was a disadvantage now, its great boots sank into the mud with every step, slowing it down. Corin would catch up before they reached the coach. Then all he had to do was slow the monster down long enough for the others to join in.

Ten feet from the coach the creature turned to face him. Again it swung its massive weapon, this time in a sweeping overhand stroke. Corin dropped to one knee to absorb the force of the impact. He held his own blade out in front of him, parallel to the ground, braced to catch the blow. The orog's fierce weapon met with Corin's own, and its faint glow erupted in a blinding flash of magic. The weapon shattered Corin's own blade, its momentum barely even slowed as it continued on its arc, slicing through Corin's outstretched arm. The blade bit clean through Corin's sword arm just below the elbow, effortlessly carving armor, skin, sinew, and bone.

The force of the blow threw Corin onto his back, his severed hand dropped twitching to the ground beside him. The pain shooting up from the bloody stump that was once his hand nearly blinded Corin, but his warrior training forced his body to react instinctively. His legs

pushed out hard against the ground, somersaulting him backward away from the killing blow.

The orog took a quick swipe at Corin as he rolled out of range, but the sight of the other White Shields quickly closing ground kept it from pursuing its crippled foe. Instead, it turned and took three huge strides, then leaped up into the driver's seat of the coach. Corin struggled to his knees, covered in slime and mud, still clutching his bloody stump and trying to staunch the flow of blood.

The orog stared down at him for a brief second, then in a thick growl shouted out above the fury of the storm, "When they ask who took your hand, human, tell them it was Graal!"

With that he whipped the horses once and the carriage lurched forward, rumbling off to disappear into the storm.



Two years later, Corin woke with a start, tipping his mug and spilling ale onto the tavern floor. The scream of rage and despair died in his throat as the nightmare faded away to be replaced by the dank surroundings of the Weeping Griffin, possibly the worst tavern in the whole of the Dragon Coast.

Instantly he knew where he was. He spent most afternoons there, huddled by himself at a table in the corner drinking until he passed out. Evenings and mornings, too. The ale was flat, stale, and bitter. More often than not roaches and other insects would be found drowned at the bottom of an empty flagon. The serving wenches were old and withered, their tongues sharp with age and made cruel by their own defeats. But the ale was cheap, and none of the other patrons here bothered him. They had problems of their own.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and fished a couple coppers from the pouch at his belt, then dropped them on the table. He staggered across the bar and out into the street, squinting against the brightness of the late afternoon sun. He wove his drunken way down the city street, staring at the ground; his left hand unconsciously rubbing the stump that was once the best sword arm in the now defunct White Shield Company of Elversult.