

Chapter One: The Steward of Roverham

‘Laurence! Where are we going?’ Goddard said, trudging up the forested hillside.

Laurence gave no reply as he hacked a path through the undergrowth.

Goddard looked up past the canopies of oak trees the sky was lit with watery streaks of crimson, orange and violet. ‘Twilight already,’ Goddard said, to himself. It was getting far too late for them to be gallivanting in unmanaged woodlands, especially after recent reports of an enemy camp nearby.

‘Laurence!’ Goddard repeated, with his hands cupping his mouth. ‘I know you’re keen on showing me something, but now is not the time to be messing about with surprises. We’re walking in possible enemy territory. We can’t afford to lose you.’ Goddard didn’t care too much about himself, he was just a sergeant in the 45th Infantry, but Laurence was the captain of the 45th, and the Steward of Roverham. To lose him this early in the civil war would be disastrous for the morale of the battalion.

Laurence sheathed his sword and spun around. ‘Last morning the scouts informed me that the enemy has abandoned camp and marches east to Fargreen Plains.’ Laurence’s fair locks floated in the air as he continued hiking.

‘How certain of this are--’

‘We’re safe. Don’t worry,’ Laurence interrupted, his calm voice filling the air.

The fear of an enemy ambush fell swiftly. However, it was annoying how Laurence kept information from him. He kissed his teeth and followed the makeshift path set by the captain.

Thankfully, after a short walk, of which was filled with his arms being bitten by stinging nettles and insects, he came to the grassy crest of the hill. The area was cupped by rolling woodlands, save for the east – where a grassland opened up and stretched into the horizon. In the center of the grassland, erected upon a mound and surrounded by a moat, stood a castle. Not an old, worn castle – which is often the case in the Midland Shire – its walls and towers were unworn and bright grey. Two cobblestone walls enclosed the hill. The first contained hundreds of slated buildings. The second held the castle and courtyard. Surrounding the walls were acres of farmlands that stretched far into every direction before being swallowed up by flanks of pollarded oak trees.

He sat on the floor, stretching fingers through grass, allowing the view to soak up the stress and aches of his hard day of work.

‘It’s complete,’ Laurence said, throwing his hands towards the castle. ‘Behold, Haersley Palace! Construction started when I was just seventeen years old and here I am – five years later – ready to claim her!’

‘Your father’s willed it to you?’ Goddard said, baffled. Laurence’s father, Lord Arthur Rivers, was not known for his generosity. He’d never give a castle away so freely, even to one of his sons.

‘No,’ Laurence replied. ‘But when I “prove myself fit for lordship” I’ll become the Steward of Haersley Palace.’ Laurence reached into a bag slung across his chest and retrieved a pipe. After a quick polish, he stuffed it with tobacco and lit it. A wisp of smoke spiralled out of it and dispersed into the wind, filling the area with its alluring smell. ‘It’s a bit of an upgrade from Roverham Hall, don’t you think?’

Goddard nodded, but he didn’t agree. There was nothing wrong with Roverham Hall, it wasn’t grand indesign like Haersley Palace, but it made a comfortable home for both of them during their teenage years.

‘Fancy a puff?’ Laurence said, handing him the pipe.

‘Aye, after the day I had – I need it,’ he answered. His lungs expanded with smoke and warmth spread throughout his chest. The exhale carried his stress away in the same fashion as the wisp of smoke that curled out of his nose.

“‘After the day I’ve had’?” Laurence recited, ‘what are the daily duties of a sergeant in my father’s army?’

‘Supervising privates, checking inventory and taking orders from blue-bloods like yourself,’ he replied. ‘It isn’t exactly difficult... just mentally draining.’

‘Don’t worry, dear friend. You won’t have to keep up with those trivial duties for much longer. Once you’ve served the minimum requirement – I’ll promote you to CO.’ Laurence patted him on the back.

Goddard sighed deeply, rolling his eyes. Ever since Laurence gained command of the battalion he had been adamant on making Goddard a commissioned officer, despite Goddard’s determination to remain a sergeant.

There were hundreds of reasons not to climb the ranks. Due to his common background, harassment from blue-bloods were a prominent threat. Demanding duties. Attending war councils. Just to list a few. But the main reason was that he had formed a close bond with the men of his battalion. There was no tension in the air when he spoke them, which is the opposite when he encounters blue-bloods, save for Laurence – until of late that is: Laurence was changing into a different person, one he could seldom relate to.

Goddard said, in a calm, yet strict voice. ‘My stance on this matter hasn’t changed. I’m remaining a sergeant. Promote a man that deserves it. In fact, I could recommend at least a dozen hard working folk that have been working their arses off for a promotion.’

‘It will change, eventually...’ Laurence said, ‘and do you know why? Because I’m the Steward of Roverham and your captain. When I give orders – you accept them.’

Goddard winced. It took all of his mental ability to hold back his fist from whacking Laurence’s jaw to pieces. ‘You’re actually shifting into a typical toff, mate.’

Laurence’s face showed anger. ‘No-no, I’m far different from them. I have ambition.’ Laurence rose, his bright eyes focused on the castle. ‘My father is a *cunt*. He has never treated me with even an ounce of respect. He didn’t catapult me to where I am today – I worked hard, as you know. So, I’m not sorry if I come off a bit arrogant. I deserve it.’

Goddard felt the coming of laughter in his throat – it took plenty of willpower to suppress it. Of course that was Laurence’s reply, it always was to criticism. Sure, Laurence’s father didn’t catapult him to the rank of captain, but what he didn’t understand is that his surname enabled him to bypass the hurdles of which clutters a commoner’s path to success in the military.

‘Enough of this,’ Goddard said, ‘did you just bring me up here to show a castle?’

‘No,’ Laurence replied, folding his arms. ‘My cunt of a father has begun his campaign against those betraying nobles in the Southernland shire. He along with several of my uncles and my brother have begun their march on Sunderhill. That is his first objective.’

‘Sunderhill?’ Goddard blurted out, blinking. The 45th had just erected camp in Farrenwoods – the fortress of Sunderhill stands hundreds of miles afar from their current location. ‘Why are we here then?’

Laurence began slowly pacing about, whilst biting the nail of his index finger. 'My request to join the campaign was denied – as one would expect. Despite earning my rank, that cunt doesn't think I qualify to join him. Instead, I've been given another task.

'The Steward of Southborough marches on Roverham. Our objective is to fortify the town, repel the assault and hold out for orders.'

Goddard nodded. 'We ought to be on a move then. Roverham's about a two day march from camp.'

Laurence remained silent. It was an uncomfortable minute or two, where Goddard just watched the captain spit out pieces of nail onto the grass.

At last, Laurence finally spoke. 'Can I trust you?'

He furrowed his brow at Laurence. 'You still have to ask yourself that question after fourteen years of companionship?'

'Don't take offense: I have to be protective with this information,' Laurence sat down and cleared his throat. 'After two weeks of evaluation – I've decided to change objectives. Our battalion is going to meet the Steward of Southborough in the field.'

Goddard jerked back, his mouth opened in shock. 'Why on Los Besoth would you do that?'

'Look – think about it,' Laurence said, leaning forward – talking excitedly with his hands. 'If our battalion manages to either slay the Steward or cripple him it'll prove my strategic brilliance. My father will have no option but to invite me to the campaign roster.'

Goddard brought his thumb to his bottom lip. That move is too risky, he thought. 'Is it wise to go against your father? He has fought in countless wars, so his orders must be the smartest. No offense.'

Laurence extended a pale finger at him. 'Listen, dear friend. You're literally the only person in my life that has supported me. I need you to be on my side, otherwise my plan could go tits up.'

'It'll go "tits up", because this is a bad idea. We shouldn't risk our men for the sake of your ego.'

A cold wind swept confidence from Goddard. He just realised how offensive his comment was. His words echoed in his mind throughout that long stretch of silence.

Laurence's face was motionless, his bright eyes darkened by his narrowed brow. 'Careful. I love you like a brother, so I'll forgive your words *this* time.' Laurence rose, shaking his head. 'Can't believe I thought you'd support me. How disappointing.'

When Laurence began descending the hill, Goddard bit his thumb with enough rage to fell a tower of cobblestone with one punch. When his tongue met with a bitter taste, the anger vanished. He watched the trickle of blood run down his bronze-coloured skin from the reddish-blue bite mark on his thumb.

He watched the sun gave its final burst of light before drowning into the forested hills. Darkness swept the realm, leaving him cold and hollow.

Whilst the plan would definitely catch the Steward of Southborough by surprise, there were a number of limitations. The first was that their battalion was short on numbers. An average battalion contains about one thousand men, the 45th was down to just eight hundred and fifty-three, due to reforms in the army by Lord Rivers. The second, and perhaps the one that could lose them the actual fight, is their low number of officers – they only had forty. Goddard chuckled nervously. To think Laurence could defeat an entire battalion with only forty officers was a symptom of an egotistical fool. It'd be anarchy on the ally side of the battlefield.

Goddard rose, certain of his decision: something must be done to stop Laurence's plan from going into fruition, otherwise the entire battalion would be slaughtered. He can't let that happen, not to the men he'd sworn to protect.

It was an awkward hike back to the encampment. They hadn't spoken since their argument. Goddard wasn't angry any longer, he was focused on rescuing his battalion, but Laurence seemed furious. They parted ways at the entry of the camp, Laurence didn't even turn around to wave goodbye.

It was twilight now and soldiers were sitting around bonfires doing things as men do after a hard day of work. The sound of hammers upon steel and wood filled the air, for Laurence had ordered craftsmen to work throughout the night to produce stock for the war effort. The stench of body odour, oil, wood and metal joined in marriage to produce a nose-tickling scent that clung to the area.

Goddard sat at an empty bonfire, head bowed. 'What should I do?'

The Battalion prefect sat down at the same bonfire with a bowl of green liquid. That's when an idea popped into his head.

'Hector,' Goddard waved.

The prefect sighed before looking up at Goddard. 'Yes, Mr. Merryway?' he replied, in a monotone voice.

'May I borrow a pen and sheet of paper?' Goddard asked.

'For what reason do you require these instruments?'

'Need to pen a complaint made by one of the privates.'

The prefect glanced at his steaming bowl of soup. 'Is it urgent or may I enjoy my food for just one minute?'

'It is.'

The prefect rose sluggishly, placing his bowl on his seat. 'Fine... follow me.' He fastened a black cloak about him, as was the uniform of a prefect, and led Goddard to a tent a few paces away. Goddard stood at the entrance and watched Hector gather a pen and paper from shelves.

'Return the pen before you go bed,' the prefect said, handing the equipment.

'I certainly shall, thank you,' Goddard replied. He returned to his tent, lit a lantern and rested it on his desk. He gathered an ink pot and sat at the desk. He positioned the paper neatly in front of him.

He was going to write a letter detailing Laurence's plan to Lord Arthur Rivers. Normally there'd be a strict procedure, but Goddard was familiar with the Lord of the Midland Shire due to his upbringing – it meant that his letters were directed to the Lord himself, not some messenger or squire. The Lord would definitely thwart Laurence's plan, therefore saving his battalion from certain defeat... but it came at a great cost. Minutes slugged by, he held the inked pen over the paper ready to write, but he couldn't. Beads of ink dripped onto the paper. The thought of hurting Laurence stilled his hand. Nerves got the best of him and he placed the pen aside the paper and buried his face in his hands.

'Fuck,' Goddard said, 'by writing this letter I'll save hundreds of my brethren. But betraying my best friend... can I actually do this? Damn the gods!'

Goddard leaned back in his chair, eyeing up the gilded bracelet that Laurence gave him when they first met. Fond memories of their childhood played in his mind. Their unorthodox friendship was forged fourteen years ago. Goddard was born in the town of Merryway, a few leagues afar from Roverham. His father was a veteran of war. The years of service had taken a toll on his mental health leaving him prone to violent outbursts. Goddard was typically the victim of these sudden rushes of anger. Thankfully his sister Gwynthódayn was never harmed. The attacks only got worse as Goddard

grew older, escalating to the point where he couldn't take it any longer. And so, at the age of ten, he ran away from home.