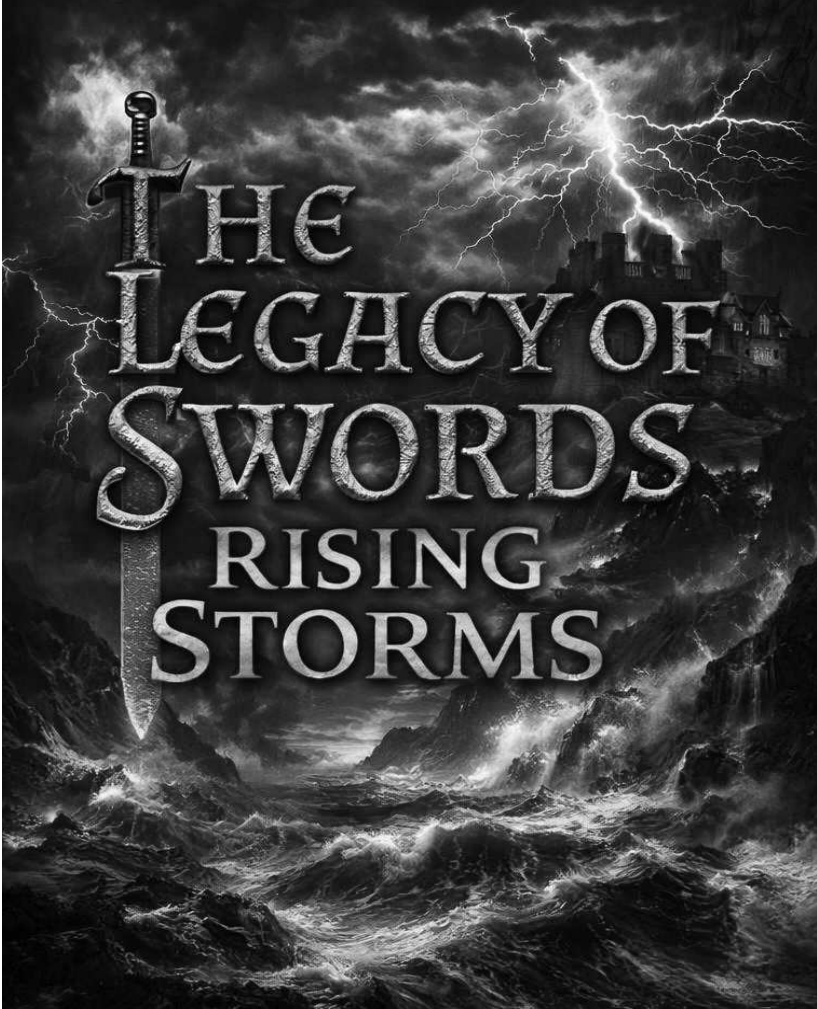


The Legacy of Swords

Rising Storms



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Governor John Syvern

From his cabin, he reread the king's letter. "Stay in your desert. Do not dare to enter Malus. You should not interfere with this. The consequences will be yours." are some parts of the letter that have stuck well. Through his window, he looked out over the Heart Sea. In the distance, he could already see the coast. Suddenly, there was a knock on his door. "Governor John." Sounded the voice of the commander of his personal guard, Commander Marcus Vervort. "Sir Ronald is here to see you." "Let him in Commander." The door opened, John's younger brother walked in. "Ronald, do you have any news from the captain. When are we going to anchor?" "The captain indicates it won't be long and advises ordering the men to put on their armour. But brother, that is not the only thing I came here for." John walked past his little brother towards the door. "John, are you sure you should do this. Barging into Amarian with a good number of soldiers. Aren't you afraid the king will see this as provocation?" John turned to his little brother. "Ronald, we just came to share our views on his recent royal decrees. His majesty need not feel provoked at all. We, and our men, only want to know why we have to stay in our desert. And why we are not allowed to join all the fun in the north. This is going to happen. Spread the news to the men. Everyone should get ready to go ashore. With or without the cooperation of the Amarian city guards." John walked out of his cabin, followed by Ronald. Outside, Commander Marcus and several other personal Syvern guards stood ready to walk with their governor. The governor of the Arenthian province of the Ecluvian walked across the deck of the Ecluvian warship *Black Monster*. The black painted ship was the capital ship of

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the Ecluvian fleet. John walked up the stairs towards the helm. There he saw Captain Yasper standing next to his first mate. "Captain Yasper." "Greetings governor." "I heard from my brother that it will not be long before we reach the Amarian coast. Now, while all the men are getting ready, I want to know from you, are you ready to defend the Black Monster against any attack by King Gordius?" "Of course, my governor. An Ecluvian will die for his governor just as a captain goes down with his ship." John looked at the captain proudly. "That's the way I like to hear it." He turned straight ahead and looked out at the Heart Sea from the helm. In the distance, he could see the Amarian coast. It had been a long time since John had been to the capital of the Kingdom of Arenthia. The last time was at least fourteen years ago, at the birth ceremony of Princess Margaret Amaloris. John remembered exactly what he was thinking when he first saw the little princess. *A perfect match for my son.* He thought very differently about that now. All the governor could think about now was answers from the king. Answers as to why this tyrannical king was sending these kinds of insulting letters to him. Containing the most ridiculous orders. *It's time Gordius started treating the desert people as worthy inhabitants of his kingdom for once.* John walked away from the helm, heading for the armour deck. On the way, he was hailed by all his men. On the upper deck, he met Local General Amir Jaloy, already fully in armour, ready to embark. "Governor John, you must hurry. It won't be long before we go ashore." "Greetings Local General Amir." Said John as they walked down together to the armoury deck. "I already got to see the beautiful coast of our capital city. Now just hope the Amaloris guards are so free to let us through. At least, if they want to see their families after today."

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Downstairs, they saw all sorts of men getting ready. Some made a prayer to Z'hlo, others sharpened their swords. "I should hope so too governor. Our men are more ready than ever. I have never had so much faith in Great General Daniels' training." "I have even less confidence in our king. And it is time we put a stop to that General." As they enter the armour deck, they quickly encounter Pedro. A seventeen-year-old Ecluvian boy, and serves as a squire for John. On seeing John, Pedro immediately makes a curtsy. "Greetings my governor. Shall I help you with your armour?" John was happy to see his squire. *Such a curious boy. That will make a good knight one day.* "But of course Pedro, go ahead." John turned to his Local General. "What is your plan General Amir. How do we enter the Amalorian Keep without too many deaths, but with enough impression." The Local General looked at John with a sneering look. 'Well, my governor, I will tell you. As you yourself point out, we want to limit the dead. But in doing so, so does the damage to the city. We must see that a civil war is not provoked. But that doesn't mean we can't show our Ecluvian power.' John was pleased with this answer and was curious about the plan. 'We will not make archers or other remote attacks. We will approach the city quietly with our ships, docking as visitors. That way we will give ourselves the advantage with a surprise attack. The port's gatekeepers will be defeated in no time, making our entrance into the city easy.' Pedro seemed confused. 'Why should the port's gatekeepers stop us? Surely, we are a province of the kingdom. Surely, we can just pass by in the capital?' The Ecluvian general turned to the young squire. 'It is customary for a governor to visit with an entourage and maybe some relatives. But not with a small army of just over a hundred soldiers. This will soon be

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perceived as threatening and acted defensively. Which is understandable. Hence, it is important that we strike quickly and hard.' Local General Amir turned back to John. 'After the alarm bells start ringing, it won't be long before the entire Amarian city guard is after us. That is why we must quickly make our way to the Amalorian Keep. Once we arrive at the castle, we should not expect to find the gates open. As soon as they hear the alarm bells, the Amalorian guards will immediately close the castle gates and maximise security. Every single guard will be alert.' As always, John was impressed by the self-confidence of his local general. 'And how are we going to storm the castle to surprise our beloved king?' The local general looked at John with a grin. 'A few days before our departure from Agbendor, I sent several scouts on ahead. They have infiltrated the castle guard and will open the castle gates for us. Once they are open, we must act quickly, because they will not remain open for long. Once we are inside the castle, I honestly don't know what you intend to do, my governor. Even your brother, Sir Ronald, did not know what you intended to do then. I know that you are a genius leader, my governor, and that you have brought great times to the province of Ecluvana. And I certainly do not doubt your leadership. But I hope you are not planning to usurp the kingdom in your anger. We are not even capable of occupying the Amalorian Keep with our small army, let alone the entire kingdom. I hope that despite your anger, you are still capable of rational thought.' John understood his local general's concerns. Since starting his journey from Agbendor to Amarian, he had already heard the concerns from several people. *They fear I have gone mad, leading them into ruin.* 'Don't go. Barging into the royal capital with brute force and making demands of the king is not a

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smart plan my son. He will behead you.' Is what his Lady Mother Greta Syvern said to him just before he departed from the Ecluvian capital. And so were more concerned family members. Similarly, his sister, Astryd Syvern, tried to persuade not only him but also his little brother, Sir Ronald, not to go. 'You are my brothers. I don't want anything to happen to you. John, you sons are too young to rule Ecluvana. Don't go.' John had ignored all these pleas. He had to and would show his presence and opinion to His Majesty. *Gordius will no longer ignore Ecluvana and treat it as scum.* 'Local General Amir, it is time our king started treating the province of Ecluvana with the respect it deserves, and with it, his governor. Not only has my family been running the biggest and toughest prison in the entire kingdom, perhaps even the entire world, for generations. But also lies the biggest and best port city in the kingdom, and maybe even the world, in our beautiful province. These are things our king must not forget. And that is what I will show him today. With a power demonstration in his own throne room.' General Amir was listening with great interest to what his governor was saying. 'It was certainly about time that Ecluvana received the recognition it deserves, but how would you...' The general was interrupted by a Syvern guard who suddenly came running into the room. 'My governor, we have docked.' John hurried over, on his way to the upper deck. All the soldiers who still below seemed to follow him up. Arriving on the upper deck, he looked out over the harbour of Amarian, with the great royal capital behind it. *Gordius, you miscreant, today is the day you are going to learn some manners.* Together with Pedro, he got into a rowboat. Once on the water, the other rowboats followed with the small Ecluvian army he had brought along. 'Pedro, are you nervous?' John

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looked at his squire and already knew the answer. 'I won't lie to you, my governor, but that's right, I am quite nervous. It just feels like we're starting a revolt. But you're not planning to do that, are you?' John turned to face his squire, who was sitting somewhat tensely on the bench. 'I understand your concerns. That is why I will immediately assuage them. It is not my intention to revolt against the kingdom. However, I do want to show the power of Ecluvana. And that we deserve more than a silly note telling us to behave. As if we were a bunch of children. This will be a day our king will never forget.' John looked at the city walls and saw more and more city guards gathering at the harbour, both on the walls and on the quay. Behind him he saw all his men following him. He felt proud and was certain that this would send a clear message. Once he arrived at the quay, he was quickly greeted by an Amarian city guard. 'Greetings Governor John Syvern, I am Commander Alain Valirad, commander of the southern city gate of Amarian. What brings you to our beautiful capital on this unexpected visit?' The commander seemed like a small man compared to John. 'Greetings Commander Alain, we Ecluvians have come to speak to the king. If you and your men would kindly step aside, we will make haste to the Amalorian Keep.' It seemed as if Commander Alain wanted to give another answer. But John was not waiting for that. He pushed the Amarian commander aside and walked into the city, surrounded by his personal guards. When he looked back, he saw more Ecluvian soldiers entering the city. He was proud of his loyal people and felt powerful. But when he looked around, he saw that the loyal Ecluvian soldiers were not the only people there. Everywhere he looked he saw astonished and sometimes even frightened Amarian citizens. John also seemed to see more Amarian

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soldiers, not knowing whether they should stop the advancing army or let it pass. However, quite a few soldiers were hurrying to the castle and the army base. *They are probably going to ask their superior for answers and orders.* The Ecluvian governor could not have cared less. The more confusion, the faster he could enter the Amalorian Keep. 'My governor, look at the castle!' John heard Pedro say as he walked alongside him. John looked and saw that more Amalorian guards were gathering on the outer walls of the Amalorian Keep with bows and arrows. 'Is everything going according to you and the general's plan?' John looked at his squire and grabbed his shoulder. 'Don't you worry, Pedro. Everything is going exactly as I expected.' As he walked along the outer walls of the castle, he saw that the Amaloris guards were keeping a close eye on him. John found the outer gate of the Amalorian Keep closed, as expected. In front of the closed gate stood another Amaloris guard, although this one seemed to be of a higher rank. 'Greetings Governor John, of the Syvern family, governor of the province of Ecluvana. You were kindly requested by Commander Alain at the southern city gate to explain yourself. You have ignored that request. That is why you now find the gate of the Amalorian Keep closed, with me asking you the same question as Commander Alain. Should you choose to ignore this request again, his majesty, King Gordius, the first of the royal Amaloris family, king of the Kingdom of Arenthia, and therefore also of the associated provinces, such as Ecluvana, will not receive you in the royal capital. And will ask you to leave the city immediately. If you do not, the king will take measures against you.' John looked at the Amaloris guard. There was total silence. The guard seemed nervous. John quickly pulled the guard towards him, drew his knife and put it to the guard's throat.

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The Ecluvian governor looked at the guards on the walls. 'Open the gates and his life will be spared. Open the gates and your lives will be spared. Open the gates and we will only have a good conversation with the king, nothing more.' There seemed to be many doubts present on top of the walls. It took too long for John. 'Commander Marcus, release a warning arrow. Straight through someone's head.' The commander did exactly as he was ordered. Z'hlo seemed to bless them today. The arrow was perfectly aimed, right through the head of an Amaloris guard. 'We are not here to fight! We are only here to speak to our king! There must be no more deaths or injuries!' After some commotion at the top of the wall, the castle gate was finally opened. John and the Ecluvian army calmly entered the outer courtyard of the Amalorian Keep. The Amalorian guard who was standing chest to chest with John with a knife to his throat tried to wriggle free. 'Let me go, you're already inside, governor.' John considered whether it was wise to let the Amalorian guard go. But before he could decide, he realised it was already too late. John saw that someone had stuck a knife in the guard's throat. When he looked to his right, he saw that it was Pedro. *Pedro has just drawn first blood.* John knew he had to react quickly. 'Men! Storm the castle! Anyone who tries to stop us from speaking to the king, kill them!' Walking calmly changed to running, running towards the inner gate of the Amalorian Keep before they could close it. The Amalorian guards on the walls immediately started loosing arrows. 'Don't loose arrows back! Save your energy and run inside!' General Amir commanded. And so, the Ecluvian army followed their governor inside. Inside the castle there were more Amaloris guards, rushing at John and his army

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with their battle axes. John quickly drew his sword, DesertStorm, from its scabbard. An Amaloris guard rushed straight at him, his battle axe raised high in the air, held in both hands. John quickly dodged the attack and slammed DesertStorm into the right arm of the guard with all his might. John felt the battle axe fall to the ground behind him, along with the Amaloris guard. Directly in front of him he saw the large doors to the throne room, where he hoped to encounter King Gordius. He tried to reach the large door as quickly as he could. 'Men! Push forward! It is time for our audience with the king!' As expected, this was not too easy to achieve. The Amaloris guards did their utmost to defend the throne room. However fiercely the Ecluvian soldiers battled, the Amaloris guards still seemed to be holding them back well. John became frustrated, he had expected this to be easier. He soon faced another enemy. This time it was not one, but two guards coming at John with their battle axes. He did not know how he was going to fight this. Beside him stood Pedro, his inexperienced squire; he could not expect much help from him. That would certainly not be down to the squire's eagerness, but pure fighting experience. Reluctantly, John called for help. 'Commander Marcus, support!' As fast as Commander Marcus could, he rushed to the rescue. But even before he could intervene, it no longer seemed necessary. The great doors to the throne room were being opened. John looked inside and saw the great royal throne room. He soon noticed that the hall was filled with Arenthian soldiers. Enough to wipe out his small army. The herald began to call out. 'Governor John, of the Syvern family, governor of the province of Ecluvana, province of the kingdom of Arenthia!' Full of surprise, John walked into the throne room. Ready for a fight, he walked towards the great

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mighty throne, where in the distance he saw the king already sitting on it. The herald continued. 'You stand here before King Gordius, the first, of the Amaloris family! King of the kingdom of Arenthia!' No fight seemed to ensue. In amazement, John calmly walked on towards the throne, pursued by his men. Behind him, he heard his little brother. 'John, what now?' Stubbornly John leaped on. Right in front of the elevation on which the royal throne stood was a line of Amaloris guards. Those same guards stopped John from walking further. 'Not a step closer.' Said one of the guards to him. John looked Gordius straight in the eye. That seemed the sign for the king to start speaking. 'Governor John Syvern! How dare you storm our beautiful capital so aggressively! You are lucky I don't have you executed on the spot here! Be quick to defend yourself before I change my mind!' John made a curtsy towards the king, the rest of his entourage following him. 'Greetings my king! Thank you for welcoming us to the beautiful capital of the Amarian. The last time I was here was at the birth of your beautiful daughter, is it not? But now I am here for another reason, unfortunately. Namely, a fortnight ago, a carrier pigeon arrived in my beautiful Agbendor. A carrier pigeon from Amarian. It was a letter from you, His Majesty the King of Arenthia. Full of joy, I read this letter. Glad to have finally received another letter from my beloved king. Though this joy was only short-lived, and turned into sorrow. I felt treated like a small child. Does my majesty not see me as a full-fledged governor who is old and wise enough to make his own decisions? That was one of the thoughts running through my head. And now, here in your throne room, I turn to you, my king, with a question. What am I not allowed to interfere with? What is going on in Malus?' The king got up from his throne and started

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shouting towards John. "That's none of your business at all, you dirty sand rat! Go back to your desert and obey your king! While that he saves the kingdom from a doom you have absolutely no concept of!" John looked shocked towards Gordius. He made a curtsy towards him, and without saying anything, he left the great throne room. John did not hear the doors close behind him. But Amarian did. Before Z'hlo reached his zenith, the capital had changed. Market stalls shuttered early, temple bells rang without prayer. Whispers followed every royal Arenthian banner. People did not speak of what John Syvern had said to the king. They spoke of what he had dared to do.

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King Gordius Amaloris

“The situation in Malus is getting out of hand.” Wiselord Avior began speaking. “The scouts say the region is expanding. More beautifully snow-capped Kafniori mountains are turning into lava spewing volcanoes. All the beautiful jungle trees in Weativon are burning away where they are standing. This must be stopped; the commoners need help and answers.” “Pff... not just the commoners I can tell you Wiselord Avior.” Said the young Prince Adam, sitting to the right of the wiselord at the council table. “I have heard from multiple sources the governors and lords all over the kingdom have questions with what is happening there in that region. Even with the letters your majesty has sent them, the questions keep coming in. And curiosity keeps luring them into the region.” The king looked at his son in surprise. *Has he been lurking among my letters now?* “Is there no one in this room who is concerned about the welfare of our commoners? All the people who just plunge into the Malus region on investigations into its origins or hunting for hidden treasures. I hear of people stumbling into Mpaka dying every day. Soon there won’t be enough Mediclords to take care of them all.” Mingled Chief Mediclord Orval into the conversation, who sat to the right of the prince. After which Great General Xander Daniels, who was sitting past that, seemed to answer everyone at the council table. “All concerns are justified. But they deserve their suffering, or even their death. They have been promised that by our majesty. Anyone who enters Malus will be executed as a traitor to the kingdom. Anyone who cannot obey our king does not deserve a place in his kingdom. The problem in Malus is indeed getting firmly out of

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hand. By order of our king, I have been working with Governor Addam Taovon to find a military solution. Hopefully, this will solve some of the problems. At least the number of dead and wounded.” From the head of the table the king watched everyone have their say. Only when everyone had finished did he start speaking. “I am confident that the military actions taken by the Bureons will be effective,” he said. “Governor Addam has never disappointed me before. What I do worry about are the noises from other provinces, which my son mentioned. Especially from the east, I have received several letters from lords but also from governors. Especially our stubborn governor of Ecluvana. We all do remember his visit to our beautiful capital only a few days ago. How he took the lives of several Arenthians and then approached me rudely. He is keen to see the region with his own eyes. Apparently, there are rumours going around that I am hiding treasures, riches and even magic in Malus. Z’hlo is said to have cursed the region because of all my greed. I spared Governor John that day. But if these rumours get bigger. And the unrest in the kingdom grows even more as a result. Then there will be nothing left for me to travel to Agbendor and put an end to the stubborn governor.” “That is a fine idea, your majesty.” Wiselord Avior replied to the king. “A stubborn governor is not something the kingdom can use in times like these. And will have to be dealt with, to keep our commoners safe. Though that will not take away the questions and rumours from our commoners. I expect stubborn Governor John Syvern to continue his rumour spreading regardless. And who knows what else he is capable of. It seems wise to engage with him personally. We all know the tales of his stubborn hot-headedness. Above all, let us not provoke the governor of the province with the largest population, all

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of whom are extremely loyal to him.” There was silence at the council table. Everyone was waiting for the king’s reply. “Wiselord Avior, send a letter to all the governors of the kingdom. Tell them that from now on the Malus region is protected by the royal army. Anyone who tries to enter the region will go into open rebellion against the kingdom. And with it, take his or her governor, lord and entire lineage to the grave. That letter, however, will again, like my last letter, not go to Governor John. A letter for him I will write myself again. I will not point out his oath to him this time. He didn't care about that last time. This time, I will make it clear to him that he and his entire family can serve out the rest of their lives at Fort Intolongo.’ Everyone at the table seemed shocked at the drastic measures Gordius just uttered. ‘Your majesty.’ Began Chief Mediclord Orval. ‘Is it wise to immediately threaten execution? Is this punishment not a little too severe? Perhaps some time in the dungeons would be a better solution.’ Gordius looked at Orval with irritated eyes. ‘Malus is becoming a big problem for the safety of our commoners. If drastic measures are not taken, the risk is too low, and people will still enter the region. Anyone who enters the region will be killed. That order will also be conveyed to Governor Addam.’ ‘But your majesty. Is it not an idea to at least give the commoners answers to their questions. And tell them why they are not allowed to enter the region.’ Asked Wiselord Avior. ‘Because from answers come more questions. And questions about a threat as big, as that Malus is becoming, makes no sense to answer. Not entering means not entering. That's all they need to know.’ The king rose from his chair. ‘Do what you have to do.’ After which he wanted to leave the council chamber. But before he could

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leave, Wiselord Avior asked one more question. "Your majesty, shall I otherwise send a letter to Wiselord Henry, the Wiselord of the Syvern family in Agbendor. Perhaps we will get along better than you currently do with Governor John. I assume Wiselord Henry will be able to bring his governor to his senses." "I will write to Governor John Syvern myself. No council seal, no intermediaries. A royal letter written by my own hand is not an honour. It is a sentence." Gordius was glad he could finally leave the council chamber. He walked through the corridors of the Amalorian Keep, the castle he inherited when he was thirteen. Soon he came across Geir, his squire. Though Geir was more of a jester. Gordius had always thought he had fallen on his head at birth. 'Your majesty, how did it go in there?' Said Geir as he stared without shame at a lady. Gordius walked on, with Geir following him. "It went well Geir. I think we found a temporary solution to the Malus problem. We just need to find a solution that you are not here staring at all the ladies." "But your majesty, surely you know yourself that all the ladies love Geir. That is also the reason you keep the queen away from me." Gordius could always laugh at Geir's silliness. After all, he knew the truth. His wife, Queen Cecilia, was disgusted with Geir. She did not want him near her and had asked Gordius to keep it that way. Nevertheless, Gordius had not relieved him of his duties as a squire. He had a soft spot for the fool. 'You're right, Geir. For the stability of the kingdom, it's important to keep you away from her. Could you go to the kitchen for a moment? To see how dinner is coming along. Then I'll go and see my wife.' Geir looked at the king with a smug smile. 'That's a wise decision, Your Majesty. I'll do that.' Geir walked towards the kitchen with the same smug gait he often had. Gordius

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walked in the other direction, towards his private chambers. Where he hoped to find his wife. It had been a while since he had seen his beautiful wife. Upon entering his private quarters, he finally saw her, his beloved wife, Queen Cecilia Amaloris. The beautiful dark-skinned woman, with beautiful chestnut brown eyes and beautiful wavy brown hair. She wore a simple morning gown, and her hair was full of knots. As if she had not left the room all day. But in Gordius's eyes, she was still the most beautiful woman in the world. "Good afternoon, darling! Or should I say, good morning?" Gordius said jokingly. Cecilia turned to her husband and gave him a smile. "Honey, it's so good to see you." They walked towards each other for a kiss. "How was your day, darling?" "My day was wonderful. I spent it quietly with our dear daughter Margaret. First, we went out for something to eat. Then we did some embroidery. Honey, she made such beautiful embroidery of Z'hlo, she'll show it to you. We also practiced the flute, she's getting a little better at it, thankfully. And finally, we did some reading." Gordius looked at the bookcase. *What a mess.* "And you leave the bookcase like this?" Cecilia glanced at the bookcase and then quickly looked back at Gordius, irritated. "No. That was your son. He's so desperate to become a better king than you that he's started reading all the history books of Arenthia. But blame your wife and daughter. They were so happy to see you again." Irritated, Cecilia walked out of the reception room. Gordius walked to the bookcase to tidy it up. He himself loved reading, but unfortunately his son had never shared this interest. Until recently, when Wiselord Avior had told him that a good king reads a lot. Since then, Adam had been reading a lot, but only history books about Arenthia. Gordius picked up a book from the floor. It was *The War of*

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Never. That book was about his father, King Gorvo Amaloris. His father had always feared a war that never came. He spent his entire reign preparing for this war. Much of his time was lost on long sea voyages in search of answers. Until he never returned from his last voyage. *If only you had spent more time with me.* After tidying up the bookcase, he went to his daughter's room. There he found his daughter. She was standing on her toes at her window, praying to the Almighty Z'hlo. Margaret heard her father come in and finished her prayer. "Father! How nice to see you." His daughter ran to him and gave him a big hug. "There's my sweet girl. Sweetheart, what do you say? Shall we go horseback riding?" Margaret looked so happily surprised. "Of course, Father. Celien will love to be taken out of the stable again. She must miss me." "Well, get changed quickly, then. I'll see you in our reception room in a moment." With a big smile on his face, Gordius watched his daughter quickly gather her riding clothes. That was his cue to get ready as well. He walked to his own dressing room, where a servant was waiting. "Dress me in my riding clothes." A moment later, the servant had done exactly as Gordius requested, and he was ready to go horseback riding. On his way to the reception room, he saw Margaret waiting, full of enthusiasm. "Are you ready to go, Father?" Gordius nodded. Another servant stood by the door. "Run ahead and make sure our horses are ready to leave from the royal stables." The servant walked quickly toward the stables. Margaret and Gordius followed at their own leisurely pace. In the corridors of Amalorian Keep, Gordius and his daughter had plenty to talk about. 'How was your day with your mother?' Margaret looked happy. 'It was great, Father. We did so many fun things. My favourite part was when we went reading. I read such a fun book. I can't

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remember the title right now. But it was about a princess who fell in love with a commoner.' Gordius laughed out loud. He found it very amusing because of its absurdity. When he looked at his daughter, she seemed to be laughing less loudly; she was blushing instead. *Young girls find those kinds of tales exciting. She'll grow out of it.* Further down the corridor, they ran into Adam. "Greetings, Your Majesty! Little sister. It was another wonderful council meeting earlier today. Of course, I won't bore my dear sister with the details. But I do want to hear more about the results of today's meeting soon. ' Gordius looked at his son with a concerned expression. 'But of course, my son. Or should I call you my counsellor from now on? Tell me, counsellor, would you like to go horse riding with your sister and me in the woods outside the city?" Adam gave him the same arrogant smile he often had. "Counsellor sounds pleasant. But prince, and heir to the throne, sounds just a little better. And thank you for the invitation, but as my titles befit, I must focus on my development. Not on horse riding. So, when you've finished your ride, you can cheer me on during my battle axe training on the castle training grounds.' The heartless prince made yet another curtsy to his father, or majesty, as his son always called him, as if he were a servant, and then walked on. 'I'm glad my brother isn't coming with us, Father. We'll have much more fun without him." It hurt his heart to admit it, but Gordius knew she was right. After a walk through the large castle, they finally arrived at the castle's main gate. There, he was quickly approached by a commander. 'Your Majesty!' Gordius turned to the commander. 'Outside the Amalorian Keep, it is full of protesters from Ghevian. They are demanding that you reduce the diamond tax on their province. They consider it theft.' Gordius seemed irritated.

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‘Make sure they are all arrested before my daughter, and I arrive at the outer gate with our horses.’ Gordius and Margaret walked on to the royal stables in the royal gardens. ‘Father, are the Ghevian people right to be angry? Aren't you asking for too much tax?’ ‘Not at all, my dear girl. These protesters are just rich whiners. You know what I always say: those who have a lot, want more.’ When they arrived at the stables, Margaret ran to her beloved horse, Celien, and gave her a big hug. *The best gift we ever gave her.* He himself would not even recognise his own horse, never even giving it a name. He wasn't even sure if he had the same horse every time. They quickly mounted their horses and rode off. On their way to the outer gate, they saw Amaloris guards walking with the Ghevian protesters. *They can rot in the dungeons.* Together, they rode side by side along AddamStreet to the city gate, from where they would enter the forest. In the main street of the capital, people were shouting all sorts of things at him, as usual. ‘I prayed for you and your family to the Almighty Z'hlo last night, Your Majesty.’ ‘You bless us with your presence, Your Majesty.’ ‘Lower the taxes in Ghevian!’ ‘Princess Margaret, beautiful as always!’ ‘Protect us from the Ecluvian scum, Your Majesty!’ Soon they reached the northern city gate and things quieted down again. Just outside the city, they turned left into the Athok forests. ‘Father, I heard you laugh when I told you about the princess who fell in love with a commoner. But would that really be so bad?’ ‘Ooh, my dear, of course we must love our subjects. But falling in love with them would be ridiculous. They are beneath our station. In a few years, you'll just marry a nice, sweet, handsome governor's son. Or a prince from another kingdom. A princess doesn't marry for love, but for the political interests of her father. Marrying for love

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only happens in those fairy tales you were talking about." His daughter looked sad. 'But father, what if I really want to?' Gordius smiled. 'What? Have you met a farmer's boy and fallen in love with him?' 'He's not a farmer! He's the son of our castle blacksmith! He smiled at me so sweetly the other day when I walked past the smithy.' 'What were you doing at the castle smithy?' 'Oh, nothing, I just heard the maids talking about a handsome smith.' Gordius could laugh at his daughter's cleverness. "It'll be alright, sweetheart. I'll find you a wonderful prince who will take you to his beautiful kingdom. Or a sweet governor's son from a province not far from here. That way we'll always be close to each other. Maybe Sven Dweylhay, so that later, as Lady of Ghevian, you can put an end to all their whining. Or Gorvo Taovon. For generations, the Amaloris and Taovon families have been very close and have regularly intermarried. Even the second queen ever of the Amaloris dynasty was born Ysilia Taovon, four hundred and four years ago. 'Margaret rolled her eyes, she didn't seem satisfied with this answer. *One day she will understand me. And become the best princess our dynasty has ever known.*

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Governor John Syvern

The two long weeks at sea finally came to an end when the Black Monster arrived in Port Syvern. John felt the warm desert air blowing in his face. And he heard the cheers of the citizens of Agbendor. Together with his little brother, he stood on the upper deck, watching the waving crowd. 'Look, big brother, the people love you. They're all cheering for their beloved governor. I'm sure of it, John, they'll always be there for you, no matter what you do.' John gave a modest smile and said nothing more. Once they arrived at the quay, they encountered Wiselord Henry, who received them with several Syvern guards behind him. 'Greetings, my governor,' said the Wiselord with a curtsy. 'Greetings, Wiselord Henry. I see that Agbendor has remained intact in my absence.' The rest of Ecluvana too? Wiselord Henry smiled at his governor. "But of course, my governor. The entire Ecluvana region was safe in my hands. However, we are all happy to see that you and your companions have returned safely. How was it in the capital?" Together they walked across the quay to the rest of Port Syvern. "Oh Wiselord, it was wonderful in Amarian, as usual. We were given such a warm welcome. And King Gordius was so happy to see us. I will tell you all about it during the council meeting later today." Wiselord Henry gave a small smile. 'It is always nice to hear that your relationship with His Majesty is so wonderful.' John responded with only a smile and continued walking towards the city centre of Agbendor. When he arrived in the city, John saw hundreds, even thousands, of happy people who were glad to see him again. It seemed as if all the citizens of Agbendor had come to greet their governor. John felt a little shy. He quickly climbed onto the horse

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that a Syvern guard handed him and rode towards *The Grand Eagle*, followed by the rest of his entourage. Sir Ronald rode up beside him. 'Don't be so modest, brother. Be proud of the love of your people. Wave to them, smile at them. Show them that you love them too.' Ronald seemed to be setting a good example. John remained modest but waved back to the people in his modesty. Not all cheers sounded the same. Some voices were louder than before. Others quieter measuring. John noticed guards he did not recognise on rooftops. Merchants watched him longer than usual. But John was happy to see that Agbendor celebrated his return. John had missed his beautiful city. He was also very proud of it. For centuries, Agbendor had been known as the largest and most important port city on the entire continent, perhaps even the world. He smiled, knowing that he could make this city even better than it already was. Arriving at the outer gate of *The Grand Eagle*, he encountered his family. His beautiful wife Vera, with whom he had three wonderful children. As tradition dictated, his eldest son, Richard, stood at the front waiting for his father. 'Greetings, Father. Welcome back to the ever-pleasant Ecluvana. As you can see, I have taken good care of our beautiful province.' As always, it was very clear that Richard was seeking John's approval. John took his son by the cheek. 'You certainly have, Richard. I am proud of you. One day, you will lead Ecluvana to great heights.' He then walked over to his wife to give her a big kiss. 'Darling, how are you? Has everything gone well here?' Vera smiled at John. 'Everything has gone well here, but I am especially happy to see you again, John. How did it go in the capital? You didn't get into trouble with the king, did you?' John smiled back. 'Don't worry, darling, everything will be fine.' John turned to his eldest child, and only daughter, Lianne.

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He ran his fingers through her beautiful chestnut brown hair. 'Every time I come home, you look even more beautiful than the last time.' They smiled at each other. 'Thank you, Father, I'm glad you're home again.' Lianne threw her arms around John's neck to give him a big hug. 'I'm also very happy to see your beautiful smile again, sweetheart.' Finally, John turned to his youngest son, fourteen-year-old Emir. 'Greetings, Father.' 'Greetings, Emir. Have you been listening to your brother and helping him a little with the governance of Ecluvana?' Emir snorted. 'Pff... he should dare to ask. He shouldn't think he is my master.' John lowered himself to his son's eye level. 'Emir, when I am gone, your brother will be the lord of Ecluvana. And after my death, he will even be the governor. You must always obey your lord. Follow your uncle's example.' Emir did not seem satisfied with what John had told him but said nothing more. John glanced around but noticed two people were missing. One of them was very important to him. He turned to his eldest son. 'Richard, where is my mother?' 'Grandmother Lady Greta is visiting Aunt Lady Astryd and Aunt Lady Anya in Darhin.' 'When will they be back?' 'A carrier pigeon arrived yesterday from Darhin. Grandmother-Lady Greta and Lady Astryd are on their way back.' *So, they'll be here in about two days.* 'That's good to hear, thank you, Richard.' Together with the entire family and the rest of John's entourage, they walked into The Grand Eagle. Fortunately, the castle gardens still looked as beautiful as he had left them. The inner gate was opened for them. As John walked inside, he felt the warmth of home. On the wall, he saw the large Ecluvan banner: the beautiful green diagonal cross on a blue background, topped with a golden eagle. 'Wiselord Henry. Tonight, after Z'hlo's departure, I want an important council meeting.'

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Make sure everyone is there.' The Wiselord bowed. 'Will do, my governor.' John walked with his wife to their private family quarters. 'The castle corridors were so quiet without you, John.' 'Did you mind that so much?' Vera laughed out loud. 'No, but I missed you terribly.' Once they arrived in their private quarters, they sat down together for a moment. 'What is tonight's important meeting about?' 'I'm glad you asked, darling. I want to discuss it with you first, before I make such a big decision.' Vera looked at John very intently and signalled for him to continue talking. Deep down, John still felt some doubt. He knew he could put his family in danger, but he still wanted to do it. Because he knew that in the end, it would be better for them. "Vera, in a few weeks, I will declare Ecluvana independent. Independent from the Kingdom of Arenthia, to establish its own kingdom." Vera looked at her husband in shock. 'I don't understand, John. How can you make such a decision? How do you think you can win a war of independence against the Amaloris family? They have ruled this entire continent, which we know no better than Arenthia, for four hundred and five years. Even our calendar is based on our first king.' John understood his wife's concerns. He too was very worried, but also confident about his cause. 'Tonight, carrier pigeons will fly out, and I will ask for support. So expect many visitors within a fortnight.' John knew his wife did not like visitors, but hopefully she understood the seriousness of the matter. And it seemed that she did. Vera nodded, somewhat nervously, in agreement with John. 'I just hope everything will be all right, John. I'm worried. Why would people help you?' John gave his wife a sweet smile. "Don't worry. Everything will be clear soon. I just hope for my wife's support. That's all the

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support I need." Vera gave him a hug and a kiss on the forehead. 'I will support you in any decision you, as our future king, will make.' Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. John already knew who it was and looked to his wife for approval. She gave him the go-ahead. 'Come in.' Commander Marcus Vervort entered and bowed appropriately. 'Greetings, my governor, my lady.' 'Greetings, Commander.' 'My governor, your advisors are waiting for you in your council chamber.' John was pleased to hear this. He kissed his wife again and then followed Marcus. John had not yet told Marcus about his plans, not to anyone except his wife and his little brother. But he had a feeling that Marcus knew. *Could Ronald have told him?* John knew that Ronald and Marcus were good friends. But he assumed that his little brother would be able to keep this secret. When he arrived in the council chamber, he saw all his advisers sitting at the council table, although they all stood up when he entered. As usual, all the advisers bowed to John. As he walked to his seat at the head of the table, he looked at each of them in turn. The first person he saw was the commander-in-chief of the provincial army, General Amir Jaloyin. Opposite him stood his brother, Sir Ronald. To the right of the general stood Wiselord Henry. And opposite the Wiselord was John's son and heir, Richard. John finally arrived at his own chair. When John took his seat, the rest were also allowed to sit down. 'Gentlemen, I have called you here for the most important meeting in our history.' Everyone except Ronald looked curious, not knowing what was about to be said. As expected, my brother and I were not welcomed with open arms in Amarian. We anticipated this and were aware of it. However, His Majesty did not try to rectify this. Considering that he had initiated the conflict with his inappropriate

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letter, I felt this was only appropriate' Everyone was listening very attentively. 'Upon arrival in the throne room, I was ridiculed once again. He called me a sand rat and said I should just obey.' Richard spoke quickly between sentences. 'Father, surely you did not accept that?' 'Of course not, son. Those are not King Gordius's only mistakes during his reign. Over the years, he has insulted several governors and lords. Through ridiculous taxes, ridiculous laws and a ridiculous sense of grandeur. And let's not forget what started all this fuss, Malus. What is he hiding from his people?!' Wiselord Henry looked nervous. "My Governor, what you did in Amarian, has already reached every corner of the kingdom. Some call it courage; Others call it treason." The room grew still. John did not interrupt him. He looked closely at all the faces around the table. General Amir looked expectant, Wiselord Henry nervous, Richard curious and Ronald looked satisfied. "On the way back to Agbendor, my brother and I thought long and hard. We looked at where we think the future of Arenthia is headed if we continue this same course. We concluded that this could not continue. For four hundred and five years, Arenthia has been ruled by one family, the Amaloris family. The entire continent under one flag, one leader. That gives the head of the Amaloris family too much power. He is even our king." The tension in the council chamber was palpable. Richard did his best to break the tension. 'Father, tell us what you plan to do before Z'hlo returns.' John looked at his son with enthusiasm, but also with tension. 'In a few weeks, I will declare Ecluvana an independent kingdom. From now on, Ecluvana will determine its own course.' Wiselord Henry jumped up in shock. 'Your Majesty, is this wise? To unleash a civil war against the kingdom? How do you think you will win? Wouldn't it be

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safer to simply obey the king?' Ronald had to laugh. "Wiselord Henry, that is precisely the point. From then on, John will be the king. There will be no one for him to obey except himself and Z'hlo. A king whom all Ecluvana will support. Let us not forget that Ecluvana has the largest provincial army in the entire kingdom. And the people are fiercely loyal to John; they love him. Some citizens even love John more than their own families. 'General Amir's silence was finally over. 'My governor, our Wiselord has valid concerns. And Sir Ronald, it is true that Ecluvana has the largest provincial army in Arenthia. But that is still less than the entire royal army. This is an unwinnable war of independence. Great General Daniels will storm Agbendor within a month. I would rather not risk the lives of thousands of men for a futile war." John was just waiting for a response from his son. But he seemed mainly pleased with the idea of becoming crown prince, although also curious about John's answers to the good, critical questions. The discussions went in all directions at the council table. John waved his hand for silence. When it became quiet, John began to speak again. "Of course, I will not wage this war of independence alone. What the general says is true. The Ecluvan army is not large enough to take on the Kingdom of Arenthia. Ronald and I have already thought about this. As mentioned earlier, King Gordius has treated several governors and lords badly. And so, as far as I know, there are also several governors and lords who are dissatisfied. So, I plan to invite them here to Agbendor. To discuss our dissatisfaction together. You all know that I have had good relations with the current governors of the western provinces since my youth, apart from Lohian. I plan to welcome my friends from Ghevian, Lorovian and Qovortia here within two

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weeks. I think that together with them, I can ensure a favourable outcome." John addressed the general. 'Together with them, we have an army large enough to defeat King Gordius, don't we?' The general seemed to think for a moment. 'If Governor Harold Dweylhay, Governor Barnwell Colvaros and Governor Wallice Floyan join us, I think we have a good chance.' John smiled. He had hoped for this response from the general. He also turned to Wiselord Henry. John could see that he was still full of doubts. 'My governor, why do you think they will help you with your independence? I understand that they are your friends. But that does not mean they will risk their people and province for the freedom of yours.' John had secretly hoped for this remark. "Oh, but Wiselord Henry. I certainly won't ask that of them. The Kingdom of Arenthia currently consists of ten provinces. If only one province secedes from the kingdom, it will not lead to success. King Gordius will recapture Ecluvana in no time. After which, my family and I will be executed. That is not a desirable outcome. That is why I advocate for a strong, but divided Arenthia. A continent where each province will be its own kingdom. Not only Ecluvana will become independent, but every province. Only then can we truly suppress the power of the Amaloris family. And of course, they may continue to rule the Athok province, but they will no longer have the power to decide anything for us." Everyone, except for the Wiselord, seemed reasonably convinced. Richard most of all. It was very noticeable that he was very excited about being able to call himself crown prince. 'A wonderful idea, Father. As your heir, I fully support you. What do you think, General? Will you support my father?' The general knew without hesitation how to respond. "When I met the governor at Fort Agbendor four

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years ago, I was merely a commander in the Fifteenth Ecluvian Army. He was looking for a new general for the provincial army. He was impressed by my leadership and tactical thinking. It was that same midday, in the throne room of The Grand Eagle, that I swore allegiance to your father when he appointed me as the new general of the provincial army. And that allegiance sworn then will not be broken now." General Amir looked John straight in the eye. 'My governor, my sword is yours. Until my last breath.' John was pleased to hear this. Although he was better at hiding his enthusiasm than his son. Now he hoped for a positive response from the Wiselord. He looked at Wiselord Henry with curiosity. The Wiselord looked at John with great hesitation. "General Amir has sworn allegiance to you. I, as Wiselord, remain loyal to my Wiselord covenant. As you know, my governor, a Wiselord does not swear allegiance to a governor, but to the province to which he is bound. In the eyes of the almighty Z'hlo, I am here to advise the leader of Ecluvana, to spread wisdom and to gather as much knowledge as possible. That said, I recognise you as the leader of Ecluvana. And therefore, I will support you in your decision." 'That could have been a lot shorter, Henry.' John broke into a broad smile. "Pleasant to hear. Gentleman, get ready. Wiselord Henry, send a letter to the aforementioned governors today. You know who I mean. Invite them to come here as soon as possible and explain my plan to them. Tell them that everything will be arranged at my expense.' Wiselord Henry nodded. 'It will be arranged, my governor.'" "General Amir, prepare the army. Order all my bannermen to prepare for battle as soon as possible. Explain my plan to my lords. Those who do not obey will be held accountable in

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Agbendor. Any questions?’ The council chamber fell completely silent. It seemed that everyone knew what to do. Until John's son began to speak. ‘What can I do for you, Father? How can I ensure that you are crowned as soon as possible?’ John was pleased that his son was eager to help. Even though he also knew that it was largely out of self-interest. “Richard, you must ensure that you are a worthy heir. Train well with your sword, your courtesy, diplomacy, wisdom, you name it. You’re friends with that tax collector’s son, aren’t you? The one from the Scutarius family? Harmam was his name?’ Richard seemed very happy that he could do this with his friends. ‘Any more questions?’ When everyone remained silent, John stood up and left the council chamber. His squire Pedro was waiting for him in the corridor. ‘Pedro, go to your sword training, I’m going into the city alone.’ As John walked through the corridors of The Grand Eagle, he encountered all kinds of people who greeted him. They were all very happy with his return to Agbendor. John saw how much the people loved him and how strongly they supported him. Finally, he began to realise it a little. At the castle gate, he turned to Commander Marcus. ‘I am really going into the city alone, as I already told Pedro.’ Commander Marcus made a small curtsy. ‘As you wish, my governor.’ John walked out of the castle. He was very pleased with how he walked out of the castle. Any other governor, lord or even king would never leave their castle or palace without guards and proper, neat, lord attire. But John rarely did so himself. He may have been the governor of the largest province in the kingdom, with the largest and most prosperous port. But none of that mattered much to him. He didn’t care much for the governorship, for leading people, the days of meetings, the feigned politeness, you name it. John preferred to work

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with his middle-class friends in the city. With his friends who had a smithy, a bakery, a stall at the market. He was simply born the eldest son of the then Governor Pate Syvern; he hadn't chosen that. What he could choose was to refuse his inheritance. And with that, pass on the governorship to his younger brother Ronald. But if there was one thing he hated more than leadership, it was obeying others. John wanted to be able to decide for himself what to do with his life. And no one would command him. And if that meant putting up with all the disadvantages of the governorship, so be it. Fortunately, despite the governorship, he could still enjoy the company of his civilian friends. He walked into the city without guards, wearing the same clothes he had worn when he disembarked from the Black Monster in Port Syvern that morning. He had never understood how it was possible that he could walk normally through his beloved city of Agbendor, while other governors, lords and kings could not even walk out of their castle gates without several guards. But since today, he finally began to understand. It was the love and respect his commoners had for him. Ahead of him, high in the sky, he saw M'hlo. Shining over the beautiful desert, with its sandstone city. He always loved to take an evening stroll through the city on horseback. He preferred to go to a tavern or help his friends with their work. All alone, he walked to the castle stables. As he walked through the castle gardens, he thought of his mother, Lady Greta Syvern. He knew he owed his beautiful castle gardens to his mother. Every day, she proudly maintained and cared for the garden together with the castle gardeners. Greta Syvern was known for being outside every day, even before Z'hlo's first light shone, to tend to the castle gardens. The castle gardens were full of beautiful flowers, plants and shrubs from all over the

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known world. At the castle stables, only one stable boy was still working so late in the evening. But an evening visit from the governor did not seem unexpected to him. He turned to John and made a curtsy. 'Greetings, my governor.' Are you going back into the city?' 'You are right, is my horse ready?' 'I will check which of your horses is ready for you tonight.' The stable boy walked away to fetch one of John's horses. Because of John's unannounced visits, the stable boys had been instructed to always have a horse ready for him. A moment later, the stable boy returned with a well-rested horse, fully saddled. 'Here is your horse, my governor. I hope it will do.' Almost every evening when John went into the city, this same stable boy was at work. John knew that the stable boy had mentioned his name several times, but he kept forgetting it. He was a little embarrassed about that. As the stable boy helped John onto the horse, John thanked him. 'Thank you, lad.' And he threw a Golden Addam to the stable boy. John rode into the city on horseback. Normally, he would think about where to go while riding. But not this time. This time, he knew exactly where to go. He rode towards the LaborDistrict, to his friend Maerc. This time, however, it was not just for a friendly visit. He also had a task for his friend. Maerc had a smithy. He rode across the large central square, where the Great Zahra of Ecluvana stood in all its splendour and glory. While it was very busy here during the day, it now seemed almost left. Most people who were still outside at this time of day were either in the Shady Acres in a tavern or working in the Labour District. John noticed the latter immediately when he rode into the Labour District. Everywhere he looked, people were still working. Blacksmiths, bakers, brewers, glassblowers, potters, butchers, and many more. John envied most of them. Deep

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in the night, when M'hlo is at its highest, John sometimes dreams. He dreams of a life as a merchant. Travelling from city to city with his cart full of goods to sell. But not to the commoners, to the market holders. So that they could sell it to the commoners. He thought it would be wonderful to travel along the Addam Road late at night, looking out towards M'hlo. When he arrived at Maerc's, he saw him working hard. It looked as if he was making a pickaxe. 'Hi Maerc.' Maerc seemed to hear John's voice, stopped working and turned to him. He greeted his friend by raising his hand. 'Hi John. How are you?' He signalled to John to come closer. It was clear that Maerc would find it pleasant to help him with something. 'I'm fine, Maerc. Exciting things are about to happen. Although I do need your help with something.' 'That's fine, John, if you can help me. Could you grab that yew wood handle and push it into the eye? Then I'll help from here with a wedge.' Maerc sat on a small stool, ready with his wedge and the iron piece. Together, the two friends put the pickaxe to work. After they were done, Maerc wondered what John needed his help with. 'Well, John, tell me. What did you need my help with?' 'Could you make four beautiful royal crowns as soon as possible? I'd prefer to have them within two weeks.' Maerc looked a little confused. 'Why are you coming to me to make four crowns? Shouldn't you go to a goldsmith, a jeweller, an engraver, and people like that?' 'Oh, but Maerc, they will all help you, don't worry. But I want you to lead them. Because I know you know what special things a crown need for me.' Maerc and John seemed to understand each other.

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Richard Syvern

In the castle training ground, he was sparring with his friend Harmam. Sir Amned Hialn watched from the sidelines. 'Faster from the side, my lord.' Sir Amned had to teach them both sword fighting. But naturally, he favoured Richard, the heir to Ecluvana. But Richard knew that Harmam practised a lot at home. Harmam did a lot to develop himself. He read many books and trained a lot. None of these things interested Richard very much. Richard only cared that his friends were good to him. And that he could do crazy, fun things with them, late at night, in a tavern. Although they had been going to the tavern less often in recent weeks. Three weeks ago, Richard's father had instructed him to prepare himself to be a worthy heir to Ecluvana. Since then, he had been working on this with his friends, but especially with Harmam. He started reading diplomatic, political, war and all kinds of other books. He practised sword fighting increasingly often. Guards regularly had to get Sir Amned out of bed because Richard had to train again. However, that had to stop after his father heard about it. "A good leader is a good follower. Someone who can serve his servants. In the evening, your servants need rest, so give it to them." He could still hear his father say it. Fortunately, Richard had arranged with his father for Harmam to have his own quarters at The Grand Eagle. That way, he could practise and learn with him more often. Together, they made each other better men. The sparring was intense. They both had different techniques, that was clear. They knew each other's techniques all too well, which made sparring difficult. Richard knew exactly where Harmam would strike with his sword and where he had to respond. Fortunately, they were both smart enough to

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do something unexpected from time to time. Otherwise, there would never be an end to it. After sparring for quite some time, Richard seemed to be gaining the upper hand. He hoped to end the sparring session now. With his practice sword, he just managed to hit Harmam right in the chest. 'Well done, Richard.' He could see that his friend was proud of him. 'Thank you, mate. Without your support and help, I wouldn't have come this far.' Suddenly, Richard saw a tall, young, blond boy walking onto the training ground. Richard recognised him immediately and walked towards him. The blond boy and Richard walked towards each other. They seemed happy to see each other. When they were close to each other, they hugged. 'Hello Gunther, how pleasant to see you. Did you have a good journey?' 'Hello Richard, certainly, although the heat here in the south takes some getting used to. But your father has given us wonderful quarters here in your castle. What a beautiful castle.' Richard had to laugh. 'It's not nearly as beautiful as your Diamond Keep, I think.' 'Well, the women here are a lot prettier, in my opinion.' They both laughed out loud. However, Richard did not want to exclude his good friend. 'Harmam, may I introduce you to Gunther Dweylhay. The youngest son of Governor Harold Dweylhay.' Harmam came over and bowed to the governor's son. 'It is an honour to meet you, my lord.' Gunther and Richard looked at each other. It seemed as if they both wanted to talk about something they knew they couldn't talk about. 'Where is your older brother?' Gunther looked bored. 'Sven is busy being the heir, as usual. And that's what I've always liked about you, Richard. You are also the heir to a large province. But I hear enough tales in which you are completely drunk in the taverns of Shady Acres. Harmam

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laughed loudly. 'That's certainly true, my lord. Richard certainly enjoys a good ale. Is it not, Richard?' Richard felt a little foolish. He had been working so hard over the last few weeks to establish himself as a worthy heir. 'That's in the past. Of course, we can still enjoy a good ale now and then. But Harmam, you must admit that I've been doing a good job of being a worthy heir lately, right?' Richard saw his supportive friend Harmam again, whom he had relied on heavily over the past week. 'Of course, Richard, but we can still laugh about all the crazy things we've done, can't we?' Richard nodded in agreement. Gunther sighed. 'Oh, Richard, please, don't become as boring as my brother. I already must live with him.' Richard patted Gunther on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, my northern friend. I'm still Richard Syvern. In fact, let's go to my private chamber and enjoy some nice drinks, the three of us.' Harmam and Gunther seemed to like the idea and followed Richard into the corridor. The corridors were filled with people from all corners of Arenthia. Noble families from Qovortia and Lorovian were walking around, and seeing Gunther, Richard knew that today the noble families and other companions from Ghevian had also arrived in Agbendor. *Just as Father predicted. All his friends have come.* Richard was not the only one who had noticed. Harmam also saw the increasing bustle in the castle. "Richard, I'm really starting to get curious. We've been training you for three weeks to become a worthy heir. And since last week, lords and even governors from other provinces have been arriving in the city every day. Even the entire army of Qovortia and a large part of the Ecluvian army are encamped outside the city. What is going on? What is going to happen?" Richard found it difficult not to say anything to his good friend Harmam. But he knew that his father would be

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very angry with him if he did say something, and he certainly did not want that. 'It won't be long now, Harmam, and then everything will be clear to you. With a heavy heart, I can't say anything now. But believe me, it will be something you will love.' Harmam had to laugh. 'Are all these people coming to watch me lure the castle baker's daughter to my private quarters?' Richard and Harmam always had a good laugh together. 'I'm sure you'll enjoy that. But no, it's going to be even better than that.' Richard was very happy to have such a good friend as Harmam. He could trust him with everything but didn't have to tell him everything. Harmam understood very well that Richard couldn't share everything either. When they arrived at his private quarters, he had his servants bring some drinks. The three of them sat down on chairs and enjoyed their drinks, which were mainly ale. 'Richard, I really don't understand how you've been able to endure this heat for eighteen years. You don't even need Zahra, Z'hlo is already breathing down your neck.' 'Well Gunther, the heat isn't that bad. You said it yourself earlier. Just look at how the women here dress. I bet there's nothing to see in your snowy landscape.' 'I'm afraid there's not much to see in Ghevian. Just a few diamonds.' The evening progresses and Richard asked his servant to bring him some strong wine. The three of them were laughing loudly. 'I once had to rescue Richard from a tavern in ShadyAcres. I had gone with a lady of pleasure. And when I returned to the tavern, I saw Richard, somewhere in a corner, on the floor, reeking of human stench. While he was singing "Our Testament" very out of tune.' Gunther loved the tale. 'And what happened then? How did you get him back to the castle safely?' Harmam could barely answer properly because he was laughing so hard. 'I... I... I... got his Syvern guards as...

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as... quickly as possible. They took him back to the castle.' The three of them burst out laughing. 'A few days later, I heard from Syvern's guards that Lady Syvern was not at all pleased with her son's antics.' The ale came back out through Gunther's nose as he laughed. "I think my mother would make sure I was disinherited. And if my father heard about it, I would even be banished from Ghevian. Emir is lucky to have such a fun brother like you, Richard. At least you can laugh with him. Sven is always busy trying to be the perfect heir. That's so boring." Richard felt a little uncomfortable with this. He himself had been working for weeks on becoming a better heir. Fortunately, Harmam seemed to understand. "Friendliness is certainly important, I completely agree with you, Gunther. But I do think it's also very important to take the inheritance seriously. Men like Sven and Richard aren't just taking over a plant or a cow after their father dies. They are taking over a large and powerful province. One is full of diamonds, the other full of trade. The responsibility they bear is enormous. More than we can ever imagine. After their fathers, the future of Ghevian and Ecluvana will fall on their shoulders. Of course, as an heir, you still have to be able to laugh and be sociable, like Richard. But taking your task seriously is also a good plan, like Sven." Richard greatly appreciated what Harmam said here. But still, he couldn't help feeling extremely uncomfortable about it. He poured another large mug full of ale and raised it. 'Fortunately, we're here tonight for fun!' Harmam and Gunther followed him. The three of them took big gulps from their mugs. After which they continued to drink heavily. After a while, Richard's head began to feel heavier, as did his eyelids. The last thing he could remember was Harmam pretending to make love to a kitchen maid. Then everything

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went black. All kinds of noises filled his ears. Voices, footsteps, lots of footsteps and all kinds of activity around him. Eventually, he was jolted awake by an enormous drumming sound. It sounded like dozens, maybe even hundreds of drums all playing at once. It seemed as if they were gathering people together. Despite all the noise, and the fact that he was now wide awake, he refused to open his eyes. He was afraid of the consequences of the previous evening and wanted to sleep a little longer. He tried to continue his rest, and he succeeded reasonably well. Until there was a knock on his door. 'My lord?' When Richard did not answer, there was another knock. 'My lord?' Richard opened his eyes and immediately noticed a splitting headache. His eyes and mouth felt very dry, and he felt very weak. There was another knock. 'My lord?' Finally, Richard decided to answer. 'Come in.' The door opened and a servant entered his sleeping chamber. 'Your father demands your immediate presence on the grand balcony, dressed neatly and well groomed.' Richard knew what was going to happen. *It's finally going to happen.* 'Have my dressers and groomers come here as soon as possible.' The servant bowed. 'As you wish, my lord.' And left the room. With his weak legs, he limped to a window. He looked out over the great desert city. When he looked closely, he saw large groups of people gathering towards the Grand Eagle. But they were not only Ecluvian's. There were also people from Ghevian, Lorovian and Qovortia. Even with his dry eyes, he could easily tell the four peoples apart. The people from Ecluvana are desert people. Their skin colour is beautifully blessed by Z'hlo. The people from Ghevian come from an ice-cold snowy landscape. Apart from their skin colour being as white as their snow, that was not the characteristic by which Richard recognised them. It was

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their rich and expensive clothes, which were made with small diamonds incorporated into them. Ghevian was known for its wealth because of its inexhaustible diamond mines. The people of Lorovian were easily recognisable by their well-fed bodies. Their landscape was full of farms as far as the eye could see. Due to their abundance of food, they looked very well nourished. The people of Qovortia were the opposite. The proud swamp people were known as the poorest in the entire kingdom of Arenthia. But Richard would never underestimate them. For they were certainly proud. They also had utmost confidence in their leader, Governor Wallice Floyan. They were certain that Governor Wallice would take them to great heights. And so, they now walked through the streets of Agbendor. With torn, cobbled-together clothes, but with their heads held high. There was another knock on Richard's door. Before they could ask anything, Richard let them in. As expected, it was the dressers and attendants. Richard wasted no time and assigned the tasks. 'You will find my finest traditional attire. And I don't mean Arenthian, but Ecluvian. I want to look like a worthy heir to the magnificent Ecluvana.' The dressers got to work immediately. Richard then turned to the attendants. 'You have the same task, but with my appearance. Everyone in the city will see who the heir to the great Ecluvana is. And make sure someone brings me plenty of water and bread.' The attendants also set to work immediately. Richard followed his servants and listened to their instructions, while he drifted off into his thoughts. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be the great leader of Ecluvana. Or to stand in the vanguard of a battlefield as a great leader. But his thoughts did not remain there. His thoughts drifted away to a beautiful black girl and a white knight. The girl looked like

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a princess, riding on a white horse. She was being escorted by that knight through a forest. These two appeared increasingly often in his thoughts, even though he didn't understand why. After his servants had finished dressing him, Richard walked over to a mirror. He straightened his shoulders and back and looked proudly at his own reflection. He admired his beautiful blond hair. He was a bit annoyed by his receding hairline, but fortunately it wasn't too noticeable. What he liked best was his clothing. He wore a blue tunic with a green silk cross slanted across the blue fabric. On top of that was the golden eagle of Ecluvana. His belt was also green. And his trousers were grey. He also wore a gold bracelet on each arm, one with an emerald and the other with a sapphire. Richard was proud of the reflection he saw. *This is how an heir should look.* Despite his convincing appearance, he still suffered from a splitting headache and weak legs. There was another knock at the door. 'My lord?' 'You may enter.' The door opened and a servant walked in. 'Your father requests that you come to the grand balcony immediately.' Richard's heart began to beat rapidly. He took a large sip of water and followed the servant into the corridor. The corridor was completely empty and silent. The only sound to be heard was the pounding of his heart. Richard had never been so nervous. He knew that the next time he saw his private chamber, he would be a different person. The silence and emptiness seemed to follow them into every corridor and room they entered. Normally, Richard would chat with his servant, but not now. The only thing he could focus on was his breathing. At the door to the grand balcony, he was greeted by Wiselord Henry. 'Ah, Richard, it's pleasant that you're finally here. Stand there, to the left of your brother.' Without responding, as he normally would, he followed the

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Wiselord's instructions. With his back straight, he walked past his mother, sister and brother, and then stood in his designated spot. He looked around and saw several people on the balcony. To his right, past his mother, stood Wiselord Aloin, of the Floyan family of Qovortia. He stood there all alone, as no one else from the Floyan family is alive. To his left stood the Colvaros family of Lorovian, together with their Wiselord Terry. And next to them stood the Dweylhay family of Ghevian, with their Wiselord Oscar. The Dweylhay family stood out the most because of their conceited attitude and wealthy appearance. Sven Dweylhay, the heir, stood out the most. He seemed extremely arrogant. Especially compared to his little brother and Richard's friend, Gunther. He looked around a little bored and uninterested. *Could he also have such a terrible headache?* Richard glanced at Sven again. Despite his arrogant demeanour, he did look like the perfect heir. *His father must be very proud of him.* Richard searched with his eyes for Sven's father, Governor Harold Dweylhay. It didn't take long because he was standing right in front of him, a little further ahead on the balcony. The rich, blond governor of Ghevian was not alone. Next to him stood the other governors, in the same order as their families. Governor Harold Dweylhay, as always, in his rich, diamond-encrusted clothing. Governor Barnwell Colvaros with his well-filled belly. His own father, in proud Ecluvian attire. And next to him, poor Governor Wallace Floyan with his simple appearance. It was strange to see his father from a distance like this. He couldn't see what was happening below the balcony, in front of the palace on the large square, but he could certainly hear it. Many voices and sounds could be heard, even above the drums. It was clear that many people

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had come to hear what his father had to say. Richard's heart-beat stopped when the trumpets began to play, after which his father began to speak. 'Dear people of Qovortia, dear people of Ecluvana, dear people of Lorovian and dear people of Ghevian. You have travelled in large numbers to my beautiful city of Agbendor, and for that I thank you.' Richard looked at his father with wide eyes, full of admiration. The rest of the world seemed to cease to exist. 'You know better than anyone that you are not here for a pleasant gathering, but for much more. Something greater than all of us.' The audience seemed shocked. "For the last four hundred and five years, this continent has been ruled by the Amaloris family, as the Kingdom of Arenthia. And when I look at the history books, I see many good deeds. Most kings of Arenthia have done good things for this continent. But when I look at recent history, I regret that. We had a king who disappeared. He was succeeded by a young king who treated us all like children. And when I look at his son, I don't see much improvement." The audience now sounded quite restless. 'Dear people, I understand your concerns and questions. What is that man on the balcony talking about? I am talking about the ridiculous taxes that King Gordius is levying in Ghevian. Those hard-working miners who must hand in their diamonds and get nothing in return.' There was a lot of shouting from the crowd. 'Or what about all the food that is being taken from the Lorovians right in front of their eyes to feed the people of Athok?' The shouting continued, but now from a different corner. 'And how my people and I are being robbed of our trade when expensive harbour taxes are levied in Port Syvern, while no harbour taxes are levied in the port of Amarian. Not to mention that the king turns a blind eye to all the misconduct of the Lohians here in Ecluvana.' Now

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the shouting seemed to be at its loudest and coming from all sides. "And after all these taxes on diamonds, food and ports have been levied, the poor citizens of Qovortia see nothing of it. They sit there, in their beautiful swamp, suffering from hunger and cold. While their king ignores all requests for help from the noble Wallice Floyan. During yet another feast he enjoys from his grand castle in Amarian." It was clear that the Qovortians were the smallest group present. Their cries may have been the softest, but they were the most intense. Richard had never seen his father like this before. He knew that his father was loved by his own people, but now populations from half of Arenthia were listening to him longingly. "Despite all these abuses, we must certainly pause to consider the major natural disasters that are occurring in the north-west of our continent. The region now known as Malus. The region that King Gordius has forbidden us to enter on pain of death. Why is that? Does he want to protect us? No, I don't think so. We are all old and wise enough to protect ourselves. I can hear you thinking. What is the reason then? Our King Gordius is keeping Malus for himself so that he can keep all the magic that can be found there for himself. He can use this magic to further oppress us! Richard smiled broadly at all the enthusiasm his father had managed to generate. He felt his heart beating faster again. 'So, dear people, let us solve our problems together. As I said before, we are old and wise enough to protect ourselves. And let us do that from now on! All I ask of you is your support.' The audience now sounded more confused than enthusiastic. Richard was very curious to see how his father would turn this around. 'With your support, we will break away from that tyrant from Amarian and continue as four independent kingdoms!' The audience now sounded

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very shocked. Richard's heart was racing. He felt himself getting nervous again. "But that's not all. We cannot survive independently as long as the rest of Arenthia remains under the tyranny of the Kingdom of Arenthia. So, we will start a war of independence for all the provinces of Arenthia! So that we can all form ten independent kingdoms! Where each kingdom can decide for itself which course to take! So that we can all live together in peace on our beautiful continent called Arenthia." The entire audience seemed to be cautiously becoming enthusiastic again, judging by their shouting. What started cautiously eventually turned into exuberant enthusiasm. Each population group began shouting the name of their now kingdom. Richard noticed that Wiselord Henry was doing something next to him. When he looked, he saw four Great Zhorians entering the balcony. 'It is no coincidence that you are all here today. If you look up, you will see the almighty Z'hlo standing at his highest point. And here before you are the four Great Zhorians from our new kingdoms. They are here for our coronation. So that we, with your support, can lead you to a better future.' First, the Great Zhorian of Ghevian stepped forward and walked towards Harold. Harold Dweylhay looked as solemn and serious as ever. The Great Zhorian recited the oath, and Harold repeated it. From a chest, the Great Zhorian took out a crown made entirely of diamonds, with a large diamond protruding from the centre. The Great Zhorian shouted at the top of his lungs. 'For the first time before you stand: King Harold, the first of the Dweylhay family! King of the Kingdom of Ghevian!' Richard was shocked. He couldn't believe that it was really happening now. The cheering was repulsive. Barnwell's coronation followed immediately. The crown was made of gold with emeralds and rubies. 'For the

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first time before you stand: King Barnwell, the first of the Colvaros family! King of the Kingdom of Lorovian!' The cheering now came from another direction. Richard gathered his concentration. Because he knew it was now his father's turn. The Great Zhorian of Ecluvana stepped forward. Richard's father knelt on one knee, facing the holy man. 'John Syvern, do you swear the oath to your kingship in the eye of Z'hlo?!' John looked at the Great Z'hlo from his position. "Under the light of Z'hlo, I accept this crown. I declare myself guardian of this kingdom and bearer of its destiny. I will rule with judgement and moderation, administer justice according to my understanding, maintain peace as long as it lasts, and wage war when the kingdom demands it. High and low are under my protection, and I bear the kingship not for my own honour, but for the preservation of Ecluvana." The Great Zhorian also took his father's crown from a chest. The crown was gold, with a golden eagle on the front. Golden broken chains hung from the crown, with emeralds and sapphires at their ends. The Great Zhorian placed the crown on Richard's father's head. For the first time before you stand: King John, the first of the Syvern family! King of the Kingdom of Ecluvana! Richard stood watching with wide eyes as his father went from being his father to being king of a kingdom. The loud cheers of the Ecluvian people faded into the background as Richard lost himself in his fantasies. He immediately felt like a proud prince. The rest of the ceremony faded away for him. He was now Prince of Ecluvana. Something he had been dreaming about for weeks was now a reality.

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Great General Xander Daniels

Normally after a day of work, he went straight to the tavern. Not today, today he went straight home. Although his house was inside the tavern. Because he owned the place. The tavern was called *The Ale Wench*. He loved working in his own tavern. But whenever he felt like having an ale himself, there was always someone ready to help him. *The Ale Wench* was in Oakheart, the poorest districts of the city. The tavern consisted only of oak wood, with sticks as windows. A top of the tavern was a little wooden tower. That tower was the residence of Xander. When he got home in his tower, he stood still in his hall. He was in shock about what he just heard. Wiselord Avior had received a letter from Wiselord Henry. *Ecluvana wants a civil war? I need to find a solution to that.* He couldn't think about anything except the war meeting with King Gordius. It was stuck in his head. He felt like the safety of the whole kingdom of Arenthia lays in his arms. *It's my duty to keep everybody safe. If anyone dies, it will be my fault.* When he got home, he went straight to bed. He tried to sleep, but that only made it worse. Even more thoughts about the potential civil war popped up in his head. Xander was known as a very strong general. But he also cared about the people. Although he loved every citizen of Arenthia, he had no family. Xander Daniels sure had a lot of friends. But no wife or kids. And that is something he desired the most. He once met a beautiful woman in Qovortia, when he visited Governor Wallice Floyan with the whole royal court and counsel. Alice was her name. She roamed through the streets of Xovira, the provincial capital of Qovortia. The moment his eyes met hers, he was in love. After the formal meeting with Governor Wallice was done,