

HOW ONE WINS WARS

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Chapter One

Capula

The Kray soldiers fought as well as anyone could have, caught off-guard as they were. Twenty of them, far outnumbered by the Justaun troops; Capula hadn't even needed to wet his sword. Sixteen Kray dead or dying, four captured, and only two friendly casualties – one of whom probably wouldn't make it. Gut wound, but the medics would no doubt try their best when they got him back to Olrind. Capula would have done the same in their position. No battle was ever lost before it was finished.

The Kray had been holed up in a clearing near the outskirts of the King's Forest, deep enough for their mottled tents to blend in with the snow touched firs, but near enough for Warden Gren's horses to charge through the trees with little need to slow. Set upon at dawn from the direction of the rising sun, the Kray had never stood a chance.

Tents had been trampled into the ground, poles snapped, canvas flattened by boots and hooves alike, the waxy, waterproof material collecting melted snow and blood. Even now, with the fighting settled, men in sturdy plate armour with the black and red hammer of Warden Bennamin Gren of Olrind emblazoned upon their chests trampled the whole scene further into the mud.

Though technically no duty of his, Capula joined several soldiers in rifling through the wrecked tents for any written materials, maps, or other clues as to the Kray army's battle plans. This was just a raiding party, deep into enemy land, so it was doubtful they'd have kept much information in case they were caught, but still worth looking. Experience told him the soldiers next to him were more likely to be looking for valuables than anything useful to the war effort. As if to prove his point, mere minutes into the search, a soldier happened upon a shattered lockbox full of golden coins – Kray marks – prompting a feeding frenzy. Capula stood above it all, watching.

As the soldiers lined their pockets with the spoils of war, Capula wondered which of the Kray had been both rich enough and foolish enough to have carried a decorative lockbox stuffed to the brim with Kray

currency into enemy heartland. He looked across the clearing, where the bodies were being piled, where four captives were sat in the mud with their hands and feet bound torturously in front of them. Two men, two women. Soldiers, by their leathers, scars, and builds. None looked particularly wealthy, though Capula recognised one as belonging to a not insignificant Kray house, possibly important enough to have been leading this ill-fated expedition.

“Warden,” Capula called. The soldiers rifling through the contents of the box looked sharply up at him, their eyes wide and frightened. “Carry on,” Capula said to them, waving a hand to emphasise that they weren’t in trouble for their looting, “but tell me if you find anything useful while you’re lining your pockets.”

The Warden was nearby. His head turned at the sound of his name, and he walked slowly, confidently to where Capula was stood. A lesser lord might have taken offense at being summoned in such a way by one of his advisors, but after two years of loyal and effective service and two wars fought alongside each other, the Warden knew Capula wouldn’t have done as much without good reason. His generals knew it too, as did his men, so none of them batted much of an eyelid. Only Lord Vincen Horran, Master of the City Watch, reacted badly to it, stiffening out of the corner of Capula’s eye. Capula ignored it.

“Pleasant day for a ride, wasn’t it?” Warden Gren said, stepping up beside him and clapping him on the back. His was a broad, friendly face, scarred but not unpleasantly so. He smiled, exposing clean white teeth as his hand fell back to his side. The man was well-built beneath his leather and plate, and hadn’t neglected exercise as many of Justeau’s wardens and lords tended to in times of peace. Short stubble covered the lower half of his face, his brown hair was swept back, shot through with streaks of grey. “Our men did good work here. One, likely two, for sixteen.”

“A good exchange, my lord,” Capula said, glancing at the pile of bodies, life still oozing out of them. “Let us hope that’s the last of them.”

“I fear those hopes will go unrealised. Reports suggest Kray raiding parties are sprouting all over Justeau, targeting the Breadbasket in

particular, and there are rumours of troops massing beyond the Ind Mountains.” Despite the ill tidings, the Warden smiled.

“You seem surprisingly pleased with that, if you don’t mind me saying so.” As Warden Gren’s assigned Gullard advisor, it was his duty to speak even uncomfortable truths, but it made him look better in the eyes of nearby lords to seem deferent while doing it.

“I’m not pleased at the prospect of war, but it does feel good to be riding with sword in hand again,” the Warden said, sweeping his hand through the air, miming a downward slash. “I’ve spent too many years doling out decisions from atop a cushioned chair.”

“There are less deadly ways to get fresh air, Warden,” Capula said, allowing a slight smile to creep onto his face.

The Warden caught it and beamed back. “If there’s one thing war is good for, I don’t think it’s fresh air.” He kicked back the corner of a fallen tent with his sturdy, black-leather boot, disturbing the blood that had pooled atop it. His demeanour changed slightly, growing more pensive as the blood ran off the waterproofed tarp into the mud. He frowned at it.

“Didn’t expect to be at war with the Kray again so soon. You’d have expected memory of the Decimation to last longer, wouldn’t you? Still, here we are. We’ll root them out, push them back, and give them another kicking.”

Capula’s smile disappeared at mention of the Decimation. He wasn’t the same man he’d been fourteen years ago. That version of himself – the brash, headstrong man who’d been determined to end the last war no matter how many Kray lives it took – had done terrible things. The man stood beside Warden Gren now was deadlier by far than that younger version, a more skilled fighter and trained in powerful magic, but he was also more measured. He preferred paths of non-violence, of negotiation and trade, using violence as a last resort. But reputations were hard to shake.

The Warden was too busy looking at the soldiers digging through the wrecked tent in front of them to notice the change to Capula’s expression, and by the time he looked back, Capula’s face was back to neutral.

“So, what have you got for me?” the Warden asked. “Other than dogs feasting on a carcass.” Several of the scavenging soldiers looked up at that, one dropped his coins and backed away, the coins quickly snatched up by other hands.

“I recognise one of the captive Kray. Ego...” Capula trailed off, his hand circling in front of him, inviting the Warden to help him remember.

“Gull,” he finished. “Ego Gull. Minor Lordling from Mellor.”

“Right,” Capula said, nodding. “I remember him from the last war. Would he be rich enough to bring that much gold to the battlefield?” He waved a hand at the rapidly evaporating fortune in front of them. Most of the spilled coins had been pocketed by now, but the number of soldiers and the size of the lockbox pieces, if anything, gave an underwhelming impression of how much there had been.

“I wouldn’t have thought so,” Warden Gren said, his hands on his hips. He pursed his lips, clearly knowing it meant something but not quite grasping what. “His father is notoriously tight, even for a Kray; I doubt he’d have let his son carry any family wealth with him anywhere he might be set upon, let alone into Justeau. What’s more, these raiding parties seem to be trying to move incognito – that much Kray coinage would be a dead giveaway they didn’t belong.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Capula said. He left room in the conversation for the Warden to make the deduction. When he didn’t, Capula moved swiftly into the gap, not wishing to make him look foolish in the eyes of any soldiers or lords who might be eavesdropping. “I suspect this means they were escorting someone somewhere. A wealthy someone.”

Warden Gren’s eyes drifted to the captive Kray. Capula could tell he was judging whether it could be any of them, but they all looked like fighters through and through. The Warden’s eyes moved to the pile of bodies, lingered there, then meaningfully back to Capula. “Well done, keep searching here,” he said. “I’ll get the dead checked.”

“Very good, Warden,” Capula said. “And I’d advise checking that there are no Abyss Runners amongst the living.”

“Will do, thank you,” the Warden said, then he frowned. “Their fuel is...”

“Abyss Pearls. Dark blue, crystalline pellets. Probably hidden in pouches about their person, but they might have hidden one or two under their tongues if they had time before the soldiers stormed through.”

“I’ll have the men do a thorough search. Last thing we want is a damn Abyss Runner flitting about the city, murdering us all while we sleep.”

Capula turned back to the trampled tents as Warden Gren bellowed for his generals. Minutes later, soldiers began searching through the bodies. The captive Kray protested in their native tongue at the manhandling of their dead – Capula had learned no small amount of that tongue during his Gullard studies – then protesting at the manhandling of themselves as their clothing was picked apart looking for Abyss Pearls. Capula returned to picking his way through the flattened tent.

“Tilly,” he called over his shoulder, bending down on one knee to lift a corner of tarp. Tilly’s footsteps came splashing through the mud, blood, and water, lighter than those of the last scavenging soldiers jostling each other to see what might fall out of someone else’s pockets.

“Yes, master?” Tilly asked, arriving beside Capula and leaning down to look under the tent. She didn’t normally go for formality, but Capula was pleased she had done in the presence of the Warden’s soldiers. They were technically city guardsmen under the direction of Lord Horran, but the Warden’s presence and the presence of the enemy made them the Warden’s soldiers in Capula’s eyes. Either way, he was glad Tilly was learning some decorum. Finally.

His apprentice was twenty-one, and had been appointed to him just shy of two months ago. Before him, she’d had another master in the form of Berenthal, over in Arturo, the jewel of the coast. That apprenticeship had lasted only three months – no fault of Tilly’s – and before that she’d had the standard Gullard induction: droned at for hours, day after day, week after week, month after month, histories, languages, theory. Like most Gullard students, she’d come out bored stiff, raring to put some of what she’d learned into practice.

Tall and slender, Tilly had shoulder-length red hair and a tendency to let her anger spiral out of control. Still, despite that and her lack of tact, she was proving a good student. Women didn't fight in Justeau's armies, but her upbringing in the mountain clans had seen her practicing with swords for years before her magical ability revealed itself. She was skilled with a blade, and even switching to her offhand hadn't set her back too much. She was a fast learner of the magic gifted to her as well, though her time with Berenthal hadn't advanced her as much in that area as Capula would have liked, and she'd clearly slept through a few fundamentals at the Gullard.

"We have a suspected war tourist," Capula said. "Rich Kray, most likely. Probably not a combatant and-" he looked over at the piled bodies being moved, "- probably still alive somewhere nearby." Capula let the corner of the tent fall, having found nothing, and stood to look his apprentice in the eye. She was only an inch or two shorter than him and held herself well, her boiled leather and chainmail armour a slightly smaller mirror of his own. Both their leathers had a dark green tint to them, the emerald colour marking them out as members of the Gullard. "You and I are going to find them."

Tilly smiled at that, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "Elixir?" she asked.

Capula nodded once, returning her smile with one of his own. He reached up and pulled a glass vial out of the chest pocket of his leathers. Had it been full, the green liquid inside would have glowed powerfully, even in the strong morning sun. As it was, the light coming off the meagre amount left was barely enough to colour his palm; thankfully he had more back in Olrind, at their rooms in the Esteria Tavern.

He felt a slight pull on his chest as he held the vial out to her, as though he was also moving a piece of himself. The Pull was something every Knight of the Gullard had to get used to, and he could tell from the slight change in expression on Tilly's face that she enjoyed the sensation of the vial moving nearer to her.

"One drop," he said, holding onto the vial so she couldn't yet take it from him. "Nothing fancy. Just tracking."

“Just tracking,” she repeated, pulling on the vial. The eyeroll she held back seemed to hurt her physically. He let her have it. She muttered something about only exploding a chicken one time under her breath as she pulled the stopper out, placed her finger over the opening, and upended the vial for all of one second before righting it again. She put the finger in her mouth. Capula took the vial from her as she shuddered and her eyes flickered closed. He smiled to himself while she wasn’t watching, remembering when he’d been inexperienced enough for it to affect him like that.

Capula upended the vial with his own finger pressed over the top, thumbed the stopper back into place, and touched his finger to his tongue. Warmth rippled through him, filling and fizzing through him from his tongue to the top of his head to his toes and fingertips. He closed his eyes, not involuntarily as Tilly had, but deliberately to enjoy the transition. When he opened them again, everything was a little bit sharper.

Pooled liquids glistened a little brighter, rippling slightly in a wind that might ordinarily have gone unnoticed. Footprints in the mud became more recognisable and better detailed. Noises were clearer too, and smells. Capula could hear the ragged breathing of the captive Kray across the clearing and could smell the blood of the dead. Coins jangled in the pockets of soldiers waddling back to their mounts, and further away still was the rustling of something building a nest in the trees they’d ridden through.

The last of the coins had been snatched up and the soldiers dissipated, all except one who was gawking at them two of them. There could have been any number of reasons for it. Perhaps he’d never seen a Gullard Knight before but had heard all the stories. Perhaps he knew who Capula was and what he’d done to end the last war with the Kray. Or perhaps he was simply surprised to see a woman on the battlefield, let alone one dressed in green who could kill him more easily than she could kill a chicken – and Tilly could kill chickens very easily, and accidentally. Whatever the reason, both master and apprentice ignored him. Beside Capula, Tilly bent down to look more closely at the mud around the tent the lockbox had been found within.

“Lighter footprints here,” she said, pointing. She moved one of her feet forward and planted it in the mud. “Similar length to mine, but thinner. Sole is in good condition, so probably someone who can afford to bring multiple pairs. Noblewoman, perhaps?”

“Good work,” Capula said.

“I know the Kray army is half women, but why on earth would a noblewoman come with a raiding party?”

Capula didn’t need to glance around to know none of the lords were nearby; they’d followed the Warden over to the Kray. “Never underestimate the stupidity of bored nobility,” he said, allowing a hint of mischief to creep into his smile. “Now, hush up and track.”

Tilly did as she was told, following the footprints easily, even where hooves and soldiers’ bootprints had partly obscured them. Capula followed behind. While Tilly followed the footprints, he focused his attention on the trees they seemed to be heading towards. The footprints got further apart, suggesting their owner had begun to run. As he and Tilly neared the edge of the clearing, he noticed a new sound. A quiet panting. It was coming from somewhere fifty metres ahead of them, where a natural bank of earth provided enough cover to hide behind.

Capula stood up straight and stopped, feeling his ears shift minutely towards the sound.

One of the Kray captives bellowed something from behind them. A warning, in the Kray tongue.

Capula whipped around to look at the four prisoners just as an Olrind soldier drove a gauntleted fist into Ego Gull’s mouth. He looked quickly back at the earthen bank in time to see a woman with pale blonde hair and a yellow dress rise and begin to run, her feet slipping on the uneven earth. Her panting filled his ears.

“Go,” he shouted to Tilly.

He and Tilly set off after her, their elixir-enhanced minds guiding their feet unconsciously towards dry patches of earth and away from roots that might otherwise trip them. They ran quickly, as did the fleeing woman to her credit, but none ran as quickly as the soldiers’ horses.

Capula and Tilly were overtaken in seconds by three soldiers with black cuirasses. The city guard, Capula reminded himself, not soldiers. Horran's men. Moments later, the riders had caught up with the woman and run her to the ground. She screamed, the noise sharp in Capula's ears. He didn't stop.

Horran's men had jumped down off their horses by the time Capula and Tilly arrived. One grabbed the woman by the arms and began hoisting her from the mud. Another groped at her bodice.

"Unhand her," Capula shouted, left hand tightening around the hilt of his sword as he waded through snow-encrusted winter ferns. He wasn't out of breath from the run.

The thrill of the chase had burned away any fear the soldiers might have had of him and Tilly, of the Gullard order they represented, and they continued to paw at the woman. Capula and Tilly were on them in seconds, pulling the soldiers away. Both master and apprentice were stronger thanks to their training and the elixir coursing through their blood, but there were too many soldiers to fend them all off at once. Capula was loathe to seriously maim them, but they were leaving him little choice. Perhaps maiming one would prompt the others to stop...

He wrapped his hand decisively around the nearest soldier's wrist and instantly felt power buzzing through him. It felt like his whole body was minutely vibrating. Then the vibrations gained movement, pulsing up his torso and along his arm, the whole process taking a fraction of a second. The vibrations reached a peak at his fingertips, just as the sound of more approaching horses rose over the din.

The men around still fought, but suddenly did so more stiffly, as though trying to extricate themselves. Capula paused, holding the magic in his fingertips – not letting it dissipate, not letting it explode beyond him – and looked around.

Lord Vincen Horran had arrived, staring down from his horse, his black doublet untouched, red sickle emblazoned on his chest. His eyes were locked onto Capula's, his mouth curved in a thin sneer. Everyone in the scrum had frozen. The panting of soldiers filled Capula's ears, Tilly's

heartbeat was strong but steady somewhere behind him, and underneath it all was the whimpering of the Kray woman.

“Call off your men, my lord,” Capula said, magic still fizzing in his fingertips.

Horran’s sneer intensified.

Capula pursed his lips.

The Master of the City Watch had never much liked him, and Capula had never quite understood why. It didn’t seem to be the usual mistrust of the Gullard, but something altogether more base. The look on Lord Horran’s face said that he knew the bind Capula was in – stuck between wanting to protect the noblewoman and wanting not to deliberately injure allied soldiers – and he wasn’t going to do a damn thing about it.

The man Capula was holding began to squirm, and the others took Horran’s silence as permission to continue. A metal-on-metal scraping sound came from behind as someone unsheathed a sword. Damn and blast. They really were going to make him do this, weren’t they? There were ten soldiers. If it came to it, he and Tilly could take them, but killing soldiers from their own side to save a Kray noblewoman wouldn’t help either Capula’s reputation or that of the Gullard, even if most Kray noblewomen were more valuable than ten soldiers’ lives combined.

Just then, more horses arrived. The Warden and his generals – older men slower to their steeds – pulled up. Horran’s sneer vanished.

“Unhand her, fools,” he called.

The soldiers around Capula and Tilly moved as though a spell had been lifted, making space, dropping the Kray woman back into the mud. Capula released the soldier whose wrist he’d gripped. The man looked back at him with wounded eyes, rubbing at a red patch of skin, then circling his hand to massage the feeling back into it. Did the soldier know how close he’d come to having that entire hand blasted off?

“Who do we have here?” Warden Gren asked, wheeling his horse around, looking down at the Kray woman. Capula looked at her too.

Blonde hair, pointed chin, a slim frame hidden beneath an increasingly muddy yellow dress. She looked up at the Warden and his generals with her nostrils flared but didn't say a word.

"Speak now," Warden Gren said. "If you are truly noble, you will be treated accordingly. Who are you?"

"I am Marina of Mellor," the woman said, her voice high and defiant.

The Warden frowned at that. He looked at his assembled generals, all of whom either stayed still or shook their heads, then across the gathered soldiers until he caught sight of Capula. He beckoned him over, then leaned down to confer quietly with him. Over the Warden's shoulder, Capula caught Lord Horran frowning at them.

"Have you heard of her?"

"Can't say I have, Warden," Capula said, "but it has been a time since my last trip to Mellor. She may have married into a powerful family in that time, perhaps even to Ego Gull, though why he'd bring his own wife to enemy lands, I couldn't say. I can send a message to the Gullard to be sure, but it may be weeks before we hear back. They'll have more pressing matters to attend to with the Kray gathering so close to the mountains."

Warden Gren nodded to himself, digesting Capula's words, straightening in his saddle.

"Fetch some manacles," he said, speaking effortlessly over the others, who had begun murmuring amongst themselves while he and Capula conferred. "We'll take her back to Olrind with the others. And if any man touches a hair on her head, I'll personally see to it that he is castrated."

The Warden didn't wait to check he'd been understood but turned around and began steering his horse back to the clearing. Most of his generals followed, one – Lord Pechant, Master Archivist – staying to orchestrate the Kray woman's capture. Lord Horran and his men stayed too, openly glowering now that the Warden had gone.

Capula and Tilly stayed too. Lord Pechant was a good man but had a more flexible backbone than Capula liked. He didn't trust the man to keep a close enough eye on Horran's soldiers as they secured the woman.

Capula and Tilly watched while the Kray woman's hands were bound with rope in front of her. She looked terrified but didn't resist as she was led away.

"She should not have come here," Tilly murmured, just the two of them left where the woman had been apprehended.

"No," Capula said, watching the procession walk away, Horran and Lord Pechant on their horses at the fore. "She certainly shouldn't have.

Chapter Two

Capula

Porridge with a chunk of apricot preserve mixed through it. Capula's usual breakfast. He'd had it almost every day since he'd begun his appointment in Olrind eighteen months ago. Sitting beside him, Tilly made a disgusted sound from the back of her throat.

"Doesn't it get boring?" she asked, eyeing his bowl.

Capula smiled sideways at her, then looked back at his spoon steaming just in front of his mouth. He blew on it. "When you get to my age, you start preferring boring over surprising."

"You're not even twice my age."

"Was that scraping sound your eyes rolling or your teeth grinding? I've not had my drop of elixir yet this morning, so I find it hard to tell." Capula slid the spoon into his mouth and chewed contentedly, knowing she was glaring at him from the side. Tilly certainly spoke back more than any of his previous apprentices. Many would have found that annoying – and Capula had to admit it sometimes was – but it was mostly refreshing.

"And it's true that I'm not twice your age," Capula admitted, scooping up another spoonful of porridge. "But sometimes I feel I've lived two full lifetimes. Maybe more."

"Explains the wrinkles," Tilly said, her plate scraping as she slid it towards her across the rough wooden bar. Hers was a bacon sandwich, the bacon overdone and crispy, just as she seemed to like it. She bit a mouthful from the middle of one half, then continued while she chewed. "I'd gladly take some of that lived experience off your hands. Feels like I've spent the last year doing nothing." The severity of her tone was hard to judge through the bacon and bread in her mouth, but her brow was deeply furrowed.

"It may not have been as exciting as defending your mountain village from bandits and ferocious wildlife, but without your Gullard induction and your months with Berenthal, you wouldn't be here now."

"Here, now, is a boring place to be."

“You had a taste of excitement with that Kray raiding party not two weeks ago,” Capula said, lowering his spoon slightly and looking at her sideways.

“But didn’t cross swords with even a single one. They were all dead or captured by the time I dismounted. Hardly much of an excitement.”

“There’s a war brewing, Tilly, and you’re on your way to becoming a Knight of the Gullard. Trust me, battle will come, and, with any luck, it’ll kill your enthusiasm for more.” Capula looked knowingly at her, prompting her to roll her eyes and take another massive chunk out of her sandwich. Capula held back a sigh.

Tilly was competent and intelligent, and better with a sword on account of her upbringing than any apprentice he’d ever had, but she also had a bloodthirstiness Capula had never before encountered in an apprentice. He’d made no secret of his disapproval, but suspected she wouldn’t learn until she’d seen the horrors of war first-hand. Losing a battle, seeing your friends cut down, dealing with your own wounds. Even the brutalised remains of an enemy tended to change how one felt about these things. It had for Capula. But, then again, it had taken him a while to see the light.

They were sat at one of the tables in the taproom of the Esteria Tavern, almost directly beneath the rooms they used as lodgings. Capula had lived in a small room in the castle when he first arrived, but he preferred to be out in the city where information flowed more freely and there were fewer political games to get ensnared in. Being advisor to Warden Gren was hard enough without worrying about the petty egos of everyone else at court.

It was better for Tilly to learn out here in the city too. Being a good advisor meant knowing what was happening not just in court but throughout the rest of the city as well, and while court gossip tended to flow freely from the castle, there wasn’t much gossip that made it the other way. She’d learn too what ordinary citizens thought of Gullard Knights, if the situation with Berenthal hadn’t taught her that already.

The Esteria was one of the nicer taverns in the city. Not the nicest, but a damn sight better than the taverns further down the hill, where the

roads levelled out and waste began to pool at the edges of the streets. Some would have preferred to be nearer the castle keep, in one of those taverns with polished flagstones, rich tapestries, and a perpetually stoked fire, but the Gullard was paying for their accommodation, and even the pockets of a magical order serving as advisors and problem solvers to the country's rulers could only stretch so far. Still, the Esteria had ample gardens to practice combat and other disciplines in, the fire stayed lit throughout most of winter, and the rooms upstairs were comfortable enough for them both, even if the mattresses did itch a little.

Capula had just managed to get a spoonful into his mouth without Tilly making some jibe at his expense when Piotr, the Esteria's owner, emerged from the room behind the bar. Capula nodded respectfully to him, a gesture the man returned. Beside Capula, Tilly tucked into the second half of her bacon sandwich. Emerging behind Piotr as both master and apprentice chewed their food was a new serving boy. The boy was surprisingly muscular, perhaps eighteen or nineteen, but moved off behind Piotr with his head bowed.

"Shouldn't you be training with the others this morning, lad?" Capula asked, swallowing his mouthful. Boys sixteen to twenty were required to undergo military training once per week in Olrind. Conscription was an older practice that had been dropped in most regions, but Warden Gren was wise. The Breadbasket – the fertile lands south of the Ind Mountains he was sworn to govern and protect – fed most of Justeau. People had been fighting over this land since before Capula's birth, so an army close at hand was a useful thing for the Warden to have. Both Piotr and the new boy stopped behind the bar and looked at him.

"Just curious, not accusing," Capula added, raising a hand to wave off any offence he might have caused. "War may soon be upon us, and a strapping lad like you would be a boon for any army."

"A boon?" Tilly whispered. "Maybe you are old."

The boy looked sharply at Piotr, as if unsure whether he was supposed to answer himself.

"He's not fit for it, sir," Piotr said, wringing his hands. Capula hadn't meant to make them uncomfortable with his question, but it seemed

to have happened anyway. “Can’t form a thought of his own if it’s not lifting or eating. As much a liability on the front as a... as a boon. Recruiting officer said so himself.”

“Very well,” Capula said. “Sorry to have rankled you both.”

Tilly groaned.

While Piotr had been too old to fight in the last war against Khankess, Capula knew he’d been an officer in the one before that, against the Kray. By all accounts, he’d carried himself well, so, if the innkeeper felt this boy didn’t belong in battle, he was probably right. Piotr and the serving boy moved off along the bar to the taps, and the innkeeper began teaching him – with obvious difficulty – how to pour ale without it frothing.

Capula turned back to his porridge, but two mouthfuls later, the door to the Esteria opened and a young messenger boy came running in, out of breath, rolled parchment clutched too tightly in one hand.

“Which one of you’s the finger knight?” the boy asked, wide eyes sweeping across the bar.

Capula looked at the boy, immediately grabbing his attention, then looked pointedly at Piotr and the serving boy, the only other people in the Esteria this early. He raised his eyebrows, inviting the messenger to work it out for himself. The messenger trotted close and handed the parchment to Capula, then actually had the audacity to hold his hand out for a copper.

Capula eyed the boy and his outstretched hand over the crumpled parchment as he unfurled it. “‘Finger knight’ is a term we aren’t particularly fond of, you know.”

The boy shrugged. Capula rolled his eyes.

“Give him a copper,” he said to Tilly. She pulled the bag of pennies from her belt to pay the boy while Capula read the note. It was a summons from Bennamin Gren, Warden of the Breadbasket, and there were three unusual things about it. First, was that it gave no indication of what the summons was for. There was no mention of topic to be discussed, only a ‘matter of some import’. Secondly, the request – and it was a request in name only – asked Capula to come to the Warden’s private solar, rather than his office. And finally, it specified that Capula should come alone.

“What is it?” Tilly asked, raising her chin to peer over the top of the parchment.

“I’ve been summoned by the Warden.”

“Let’s go,” Tilly said. She hopped down off her stool and was already checking her short sword was secure in the fastenings on her belt before Capula could even open his mouth to respond.

“No,” he said, touching her shoulder to interrupt her, serious but gentle. “Just me this time. But I’ll be sure to fill you in as soon as I get back.”

Tilly sat heavily back onto her stool, disappointment clear in her eyes.

“If you’re able,” she sighed.

“If I’m able,” he confirmed. “It’s probably nothing,” he said, though they both knew it wasn’t true. He was just about to move off when he remembered Warden Gren asking whether there was any word from the Gullard about their captive Kray woman during their last meeting. “I take it there was no letter from the Gullard when you checked the rookery this morning?” Capula asked Tilly.

She shook her head, then returned to her bacon sandwich.

Capula looked to the messenger boy and pulled a second copper from the pouch on his own belt. “Run ahead and tell one of the Warden’s stewards that I’ll meet him in his solar in thirty minutes’ time. From now, not from when you arrive.” Capula flicked the copper through the air. The boy caught it and smiled a gappy smile.

“You finger knights ain’t so bad.”

Capula frowned as the messenger boy ran off, then nodded to Tilly and went to get ready for court.