

SNAKEWOOD

by

Adrian Selby

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

by Scholar Goran

I never knew my father. Not until the end.

It was my patron that brought him home to our tribe, mortally wounded and ready to die.

All of what follows is for him, Gant, and his last wish that a record be kept of what became of the greatest mercenary crew ever to take a purse. Kailen's Twenty.

The stories of them in their prime are few and far between all these winters later. I spent almost a year tracking down those who fought with or against them, but their downfall is, for me, the more compelling and tragic story, one I've been given the mandate to record by my patron, out of respect for his beloved wife, my father and all those who were killed by him failing them. I have put all these documents together in a way that I hope makes sense of the fate of the Twenty in these last few years and also includes accounts of them in their prime, when, arguably, they saved the Old Kingdoms at Tharos Falls, when twenty one men held the line and the line could not be crossed.

To tell this story I was given also the letters of the princess who has now returned to her throne, as well as the man whose loyalty to her was the beginning of the end for the Twenty. The man betrayed at Snakewood.

In the moments of his dying, my father asked us a simple question, and from the papers that follow, it is clear he did not ask the question of himself.

“Who ever got what they deserved?”

CHAPTER 1

Gant

My name's Gant and I'm sorry for my poor writing. I was a mercenary soldier who never took to it till Kailen taught us. It's for him and all the boys that I wanted to put this down, a telling of what become of Kailen's Twenty.

Seems right to begin it the day me and Shale got sold out, at the heart of the summer just gone, down in the Red Hills Confederacy.

It was the day I began dying.

It was a job with a crew to ambush a supply caravan. It went badly for us and I took an arrow, the poison from which will shortly kill me.

I woke up sodden with dew and rain like the boys, soaked all over from the trees above us, but my mouth was dusty like sand. Rivers couldn't wet it. The compound I use to ease my bones leeches my spit. I speak soft.

I could hardly crack a whistle at the boys wrapped like a nest of slugs in their oilskins against the winds of the plains these woods were edged against. I'm old. I just kicked them up before getting my bow out of the sack I put it in to keep rain off the string. It was a beauty what I called Juletta and I had her for most of my life.

The boys were slow to get going, blowing and fussing as the freezing air got to work in that bit of dawn. They were quiet, and grim like ghosts in this light, pairing up to strap their leathers and get the swords pasted with poison.

SNAKEWOOD

I patted heads and squeezed shoulders and give words as I moved through the crew so they knew I was about and watching.

“Paste it thick,” I said as they put on the mittens and rubbed their blades with the soaked rags from the pot Remy had opened.

I looked around the boys I shared skins and pipes with under the moon those last few weeks. Good crew.

There was Remy, looking up at me from his mixing, face all scarred like a milky walnut and speaking lispy from razor fights and rackets he ran with before joining up for a pardon. He had a poison of his own he made, less refined than my own mix, less quick, more agony.

Yasthin was crouched next to him. He was still having to shake the cramp off his leg that took a mace a month before. Saved his money for his brother, told me he was investing it. The boys said his brother gambled it and laughed him up.

Dolly was next to Yasthin, chewing some bacon rinds. Told me how her da chased her soak of a mother through the streets, had done since she was young. Kids followed her da too, singing with him but staying clear of his knives. She joined so’s she could help her da keep her younger brother.

All of them got sorrows that led them to the likes of me and a fat purse for a crossroads job, which I mean to say is a do-or-die.

Soon enough they’re lined up and waiting for the Honour, Kailen’s Honour, the best fightbrew Kigan ever mixed, so, the best fightbrew ever mixed, even all these years later. The boys had been talking up this brew since I took command, makes you feel like you could punch holes in mountains when you’ve risen on it.

Yasthin was first in line for a measure. I had to stand on my toes to pour it in, lots of the boys taller than me. Then a kiss. The lips are the raw end of your terror and love. No steel can toughen lips, they betray more than the eyes when you’re looking for intent and the kiss is for telling them there’s always some way to die.

Little Booeey was the tenth and last of the crew to get the measure. I took a slug myself and Rirgwil fixed my leathers. I waited for our teeth to chatter like aristos, then went over the plan again.

Adrian Selby

“In the trees north, beyond those fields, is Trukhar’s supply caravan,” I said. “Find it, kill who you can but burn the wagons, supplies, and then go for the craftsmen. Shale’s leadin’ his crew in from east an’ we got them pincer’d when we meet, red bands left arm so as you know. It’s a do-or-die purse, you’re there ‘til the job is done or you’re dead anyway.”

It was getting real for them now I could see, a couple were startin’ shakes with their first full measure of the brew, despite all the prep the previous few days.

“I taught you how to focus what’s happening to you boys. This brew can win wars and it’ll deliver this purse if you can keep tight. Now move out.”

No more words, it was hand signs now to the forest.

Jonah front, Yasthin, Booeey and Henny with me. Remy group northeast at treeline

We ran through the silver grass, chests shuddering with the crackle of our blood as the brew stretched our veins and filled our bones with iron and fire. The song of the earth was filling my ears.

Ahead of us was the wall of trees and within, the camp of the Blackhands. Remy’s boys split from us and moved away.

Slow I signed.

Juletta was warm in my hands, the arrow in my fingers humming to fly. Then, the brew fierce in my eyes, I saw it, the red glow of a pipe some seventy yards ahead at the treeline.

Two men. On mark

I moved forward to take the shot and stepped into a nest of eggs. The bird, a big grey Weger, screeched at me and flapped madly into the air inches from my face, its cry filling the sky. One of the boys shouted out, in his prime on the brew, and the two men saw us. We were dead. My boys’ arrows followed mine, the two men were hit, only half a pip of a horn escaping for warning, but it was surely enough.

Run

SNAKEWOOD

I had killed us all. We went in anyway, that was the purse, and these boys primed like this weren't leaving without bloodshed.

As we hit the trees we spread out.

Enemy left signed Jonah.

Three were nearing through the trunks, draining their own brew as they come to from some half-eyed slumber. They were a clear shot so I led again, arrows hitting and a muffled crack of bones. All down.

In my brewed-up ears I could hear then the crack of bowstrings pulling at some way off, but it was all around us. The whistle of arrows proved us flanked as we dropped to the ground.

The boys opened up, moving as we practised, aiming to surprise any flanks and split them off so a group of us could move in directly to the caravan. It was shooting practice for Trukhar's soldiers.

I never saw Henny or Jonah again, just heard some laughing and screaming and the sound of blades at work before it died off.

I stayed put, watching for the enemy's movements. I was in the outroots of a tree, unspotted. You feel eyes on you with this brew. Then I saw two scouts moving right, following Booeey and Datschke's run.

I took a sporebag and popped it on the end of an arrow. I stood up and sent it at the ground ahead of them.

From my belt I got me some white oak sap which I took for my eyes to see safe in the spore cloud. I put on a mask covered with the same stuff for breathing.

The spores were quick to get in them and they wheezed and clutched their throats as I finished them off.

I was hoping I could have saved my boys but I needed to be in some guts and get the job done with Shale's crew.

Horns were going up now, so the fighting was on. I saw a few coming at me from the trees ahead. I got behind a trunk but I knew I was spotted. They slowed up and the hemp creaked as they drew for shots. There were four of them, from their breathing, and I could hear their commander whispering for a flanking.

Adrian Selby

I opened up a satchel of ricepaper bags, each with quicklime and oiled feathers. I needed smoke. I doused a few bags with my flask and threw them out.

“Masks!” came the shout. As the paper soaked, the lime caught and the feathers put out a fierce smoke.

My eyes were still smeared good. I took a couple more arrowbags out, but these were agave powders for blistering the eyes and skin.

Two shots to tree trunks spread the powders in the air around their position and I moved out from the tree to them as they screeched and staggered about blind. The Honour give me the senses enough to read where they were without my eyes, better to shut them with smoke and powders in the air, and their brews weren't the Honour's equal. They moved like they were running through honey and were easy to pick off.

It was then I took the arrow that'll do for me. I'd got maybe fifty yards further on when I heard the bow draw, but with the noise ahead I couldn't place it that fraction quicker to save myself. The arrow went in at my hip, into my guts. Something's give in there, and the poison's gone right in, black mustard oil for sure from the vapours burning in my nose, probably some of their venom too.

I was on my knees trying to grab the arrow when I saw them approach, two of them. The one who killed me was dropping his bow and they both closed with the hate of their own fightbrew, their eyes crimson, skin an angry red and all the noisies.

They think I'm done. They're fucking right, to a point. In my belt was the treated guaia bark for the mix they were known to use. No time to rip out the arrow and push the bark in.

They moved in together, one in front, the other flanking. One's a heavy in his mail coat and broadsword, a boy's weapon in a forest, too big. Older one had leathers and a long knife. Him first. My sight was going, the world going flat like a drawing, so I had to get rid of the wiser one while I could still see him, while I still had the Honour's edge.

SNAKEWOOD

Knife in hand I lunged sudden, the leap bigger than they reckoned. The older one reacted, a sidestep. The slash I made wasn't for hitting him though. It flicked out a spray of paste from the blade and sure enough some bit of it caught him in the face. I spun about, brought my blade up and parried the boy's desperate swing as he closed behind me, the blow forcing me down again as it hit my knife, sending a smack through my guts as the arrow broke in me. He took sight of his mate holding his smoking face, scratching at his cheeks and bleeding. He glanced at the brown treacle running over my blade and legged it. He had the spunk to know he was beaten. I put the knife in the old man's throat to quiet my noises, the blood's smell as sweet as fresh bread to me.

I picked up my Juletta and moved on. The trees were filling with Blackhands now. I didn't have the time to be taking off my wamba and sorting myself out a cure for the arrow, much less tugging at it now it was into me. I cussed at myself, for this was likely where I was going to die if I didn't get something to fix me. I was slowing up. I took a hit of the Honour to keep me fresh. It was going to make a fierce claim on the other side, but I would gladly take that if I could get some treatment.

Finally I reached the caravan; smoke from the blazing wagons and stores filled the trees ahead. The grain carts were burning so Shale, again, delivered the purse.

Then I come across Dolly, slumped against the roots of a tree. Two arrows were thrusting proud from her belly. She saw me and her eyes widened and she smiled.

"Gant, you're not done ... Oh," she said, seeing the arrow in me. I might have been swaying, she certainly didn't look right, faded somewhat, like she was becoming a ghost before me.

"Have you a flask Gant, some more of the Honour?"

Her hands were full of earth, grabbing at it, having their final fling.

Adrian Selby

“I’m out Dolly,” I said, “I’m done too. I’m sorry for how it all ended.”

She blinked, grief pinching her up.

“It can’t be over already. I’m twenty summers Gant, this was goin’ to be the big purse.”

A moment then I couldn’t fill with any words.

“Tell my father Gant, say...”

I was raising my bow. I did my best to clean an arrow on my leggings. She was watching me as I did it, knowing.

“Tell him I love him, Gant, tell him I got the Honour, and give him my purse and my brother a kiss.”

“I will.”

As I drew it she looked above me, seeing something I knew I wouldn’t see, leagues away, some answers to her questions in her eyes thrilling her. I let fly, fell to my knees and sicked up.

Where was Shale?

My mouth was too dry to speak or shout for him, but I needed him. My eyes, the lids of them, were peeling back so’s they would burn in the sun. I put my hands to my face. It was only visions, but my chest was heavy, like somebody sat on it and others were piling on. Looking through my hands as I held them up, it was like there were just bones there, flesh thin like the fins of a fish. My breathing rattled and I reached to my throat to try to open it up more.

“Gant!”

So much blood on him. He kneeled next to me. He’s got grey eyes, no colour. Enemy to him is just so much warm meat to be put still. He don’t much smile unless he’s drunk. He mostly never drinks. He sniffed about me and at my wound, to get a reading of what was in it, then forced the arrow out with a knife and filled the hole with guايا bark while kneeling on my shoulder to keep me still. He was barking at some boys as he stuffed some rugara leaves, sap and all, into my mouth, holding my nose shut, drowning me. Fuck! My brains were buzzing sore like a hive was in

SNAKEWOOD

them. Some frothing liquid filled up my chest and I was bucking about for breath. He poured from a flask over my hip and the skin frosted over with an agony of burning. Then he took out some jumpercrick's legbones and held them against the hole, snap snap, a flash of blue flame and everything fell away high.

There was a choking, but it didn't feel like me no longer. It felt like the man I was before I died.

Kailen

"Let's see it."

Achi flicked it across the table, a pebble across wood, but this stone was worked with precision, as round as a coin, black and thick as a thumb. There were no markings on it, a hairline of quartz the only imperfection of the material itself. The ocean had polished it, my face made a shadow by it. It was the third I'd seen in the last few months.

"The Prince, from your old crew, his throat was cut," said Achi.

Achi drained his cup, leaned back in his chair and yawned, the chair creaking, not built for such a big man still in his leathers, filthy and sour-smelling from the weeks sleeping out.

"How are the boys?" I asked.

He opened his eyes with a start, already drifting away to sleep. I smiled at his irritation.

"Sorry sir, all good. Danik and Stimmy are sorting out the horses, Wil went looking for a mercer, wants to get his woman something as we been away a while."

"Stimmy's boy is on the mend, I had word from the estate. Let him know if you see him before me."

Achi nodded and yawned again.

I looked again at the black coin in my fingers. Such coins were given to mercenaries who betrayed their purse or their crew. But who had The Prince betrayed?

Adrian Selby

We called him The Prince because there was a time when he was in line for a throne, last of three, least loved and cleverest. His homeland chose its emperors in a way as ridiculous as any; which of the incumbents best demonstrated martial prowess. His sister won their single combat on the day their father died and was thus made queen, but his sword wasn't what made him worthy of the Twenty.

The Prince did the politics his sister could not. War allows only two dimensions, yours and theirs, a limit his sister was not capable of seeing beyond. Nations require the management of more factions than cut diamonds have facets and I met nobody that could exploit his empire's *politic* more adroitly than The Prince.

I plucked a white grape from the bowl, milky and juicy as a blind eyeball. Achi peeled eggs, head bowed. The bargirl came in and cleared away the plates. She offered a quick smile before retreating to the noise of the inn below us.

I recalled the two other black coins I'd seen recently, as perfect as this one, which The Prince showed me in his cabin aboard one of the Quartet's grand galleys only a few months ago. The Quartet were an influential merchant guild across most of the Old Kingdoms.

I had travelled to see him after he'd sent an escort to get me.

"These coins were found with Harlain and Milu," he said, "I will try and find out more."

"How did they die?" I asked.

"Harlain returned to his homeland, Tetswana, became their leader, the Kaan of Tetswana no less. It was the gathering before the rains. Leaders and retinues of nine tribes. Seventy or so dead, the coin in his hand only."

Harlain would not join us at Snakewood, the last time any of the Twenty were together. He had wanted to leave us some time before the end. Paying the colour had taken from all of us, but it took his heart. It was only as we embraced for a final time and I

SNAKEWOOD

helped him with his saddle that I realised I hadn't heard him singing for some months. I was glad he made it home.

"Milu?" I asked.

"He became a horse singer out in Alagar. They found him lying at the side of a singer's pit. Someone had been with him, footprints in the sand around his body, the coin in his hand."

"Poison?" I asked.

"Almost certainly. No way of placing it."

Milu had also been at Snakewood, but stayed only for a drink and to buy supplies before leaving with Kheld. They had lost heart as much as Harlain had; no talk of purses or where in the world was at war; they did not discuss, as did Sho or Shale, how my name could be put to work to bolster the gold of a purse.

I never tired of watching Milu work, bringing the wild horses to his side, training them to hold firm in the charge. It seemed that he, like Harlain, had been able to let go of the mercenary life before the colour took everything.

"Their deaths are connected, Kailen. It must be the Twenty."

"You've heard from nobody else?"

"Only that Dithnir had died. He went back home to Tarantrea, one of their envoys that negotiates with the Quartet I represent knows me well and shared the news with me. I asked about a coin but there was none. Apart from that I keep in touch with Kheld when I'm in Handar, but the rest, no idea."

I breathed deeply of the morning breeze that blew across the deck and slapped at the fringes of the awning we were beneath. Dithnir was a bowman, almost a match for Stixie, shy and inadvisedly romantic with whores, cold and implacable in the field.

"I remember Snakewood," said The Prince.

Our eyes met briefly. "No. That was dealt with." I'd said it more sharply than I'd intended. Why did I feel a thread of doubt?

He reached across the table, took the carafe and refilled our glasses.

Adrian Selby

“Your estate is improving,” he said, holding up his glass for a toast.

“Yes, these vines were planted two winters ago, they’ll improve. I only wish for Jua’s cooler summers, perhaps an estate nearer the hills. How is the Quartet? I hear you have brokered a treaty with the Shalec to cross their waters. Not even the Post could manage it.”

“Why would I toil through its ranks to High Reeve or Fieldsman when I can be a Partner with the Quartet. The Red himself could learn something from The Quartet regarding our softening of the Shalec, but I’m glad he hasn’t, I’m lining my pockets beautifully. Remarkable as the Post runs so much trade elsewhere. They can bid lower than us at almost every turn; we can’t match the subs, but we can work with lower margins, give Shalec a fee on the nutmeg, a pittance of course. Every investor north of the Gulf believes the Post controls the winds.”

“While the Post can sub dividends over fewer summers than anyone else, the flatbacks will flock,” I said, “but enough of trade, congratulations Prince, I’m glad to see things are going well, being a Partner suits you. Will you get a message to me if you find Kheld. It would be good to know he’s still alive.”

He nodded. He had been the difference at Ahmstad, turning three prominent families under the noses of Vilmor’s king, extending the borders and fortifying them in a stroke. The mad king is still being strangled in the noose The Prince tied. His death proved that whoever of us was alive was in danger. I signed our purses. This could only be about getting at me.

Achi had fallen asleep.

I poured him some of the dreadful brandy that was the best the Riddle had to offer.

Shale and Gant were taking a purse only weeks south. If they were still anything like the soldiers of old I would have need of them. Achi’s crew would be glad to be going back to Harudan. I needed good men with my wife, Araliah. Still, there was one more

thing I needed to ask of Achi himself, one person I needed to confirm was dead.

*

The Prince and the Ahmstad

An account, by a Fieldsman in the guise of a bodyguard to the Ahmstad Ladus (chief), of the negotiation by which Kailen and The Prince secured a bloodless victory for Ahmstad over Vilmor.

Goran

Report: Candar Prime, Q4 649 OE

Eastern Sar Westmain routed

Confidential for The Red only

Fieldsman 71

You are aware of Vilmorian expansionism under their King Turis. They have been amassing an army for assaults on two fronts, the Luzhan Province and Ahmstad.

A clan leader for Ahmstad brought a mercenary known as Kailen to their war council. To say the Ladus was displeased was to put it mildly. The clan leader, Hasike, asked that the Ladus hear him out.

What follows is a transcription of the meeting as best as I can relay it. It is evident that Kailen, and his fellow that he called The Prince, displayed a formidable understanding of both sides of the potential conflict. He is a most unusual mercenary and a compelling speaker, though of course this does not come across half so well in my approximation of the meeting.

“May I ask the Ladus the size of the army he is amassing?” said Kailen.

“The clans represented here have committed to me near eigh-

teen thousand men and women. Do I speak right?" Raised voice, eliciting approval and some banging of cups.

"And what would the Ladus say losses of such men might be, were Vilmor to bring to bear an army estimated at twenty five thousand?"

"Where do you get such numbers soldier?"

The Prince speaks then. "We served with Vilmor, as you no doubt already know. They have seventy six fiefs, variously providing twenty to two hundred men and women."

"With these numbers, in open battle, the losses would be?" This was Kailen.

"Significantly higher on their side." More cups were banged at this point.

"Ladus," said Hasike, somewhat frustrated, "who bears the brunt of their aggression? My clan. We are your border with Vilmor."

"As we border the Wilds," said another, "but we do not cry to the Ladus over it."

"The Wilds do not bring in twenty thousand men in front of a fortified supply line," said Kailen.

"Bang your cups and brag if it pleases you, but you stand over a map that shows clearly where Vilmor will push, through Hasike's land and to the heart of Ahmstad."

The Ladus raised his arms to quieten the shouts.

"My council waits with baited breath for the wisdom of a Harudanian mercenary on its own affairs. I question your fitness to be part of this council Hasike, that you have brought to our gathering men paid to chop up soldiers when what we need is to outwit Turis's generals."

"You ought consider Hasike wise, Ladus. I will gladly demonstrate why." Remarkably, the mercenary sounded angry. I had expected him to be run through at that point, for the Ladus enjoyed nothing more than disemboweling everyone from servants to his own family for sleights of honour or even dark looks.

SNAKEWOOD

“You have not begun to muster from your war communes, the sheriffs and quarters are still securing your supplies; wood, cattle, grain. The men at this table await their levies, and the last time I fought Ahmstad I would not hold such hope for the weak and ill equipped majority that are enrolled. Hasike’s lands will be pillaged and burned, some fifth of your tithe in buffalo, a seventh of all your kannab crops.” He had the room now, though the Ladus’s fist was white as it gripped the handle of his axe.

Kailen swept the arranged blocks from the map and re-set them. He laid out the routes the Vilmorian army would take, the challenge for the Ahmstad forces and every way that he laid out their options they were to expect heavy losses, even in victory.

The room was silent, for each anticipated deployment and stratagem had been devised and its consequences presented soundly.

“I have a question,” said the Ladus, “if we are likely to lose, why have you sold Hasike your services? Do you and your friend of some dubious royal lineage plan to defeat Turis with your own hands?”

“No. For one hundred and fifty gold pieces my friend of dubious royal lineage will explain why you need not raise a sword to defeat the forces of Vilmor, gain yourselves land and new allies and weaken Turis significantly.”

The Ladus erupted with laughter. “If I’d wanted a fool I would have left my first consort alive. I suppose you wish to be paid before you share your grand plan with us as well?”

“Listen to him, for my people’s sake,” said Hasike.

The Ladus was always a big and intimidating man, easily a foot taller than anyone else in a room, and I’d seen him press and win, time and again, from Hasike for more cattle for the northern Ahmstad clans he favoured. Hasike was desperate. The Ladus took a deep breath.

“Fifty gold pieces. If I like what I hear you’ll get your hundred more, if not you’ll swallow them and I’ll cut them out of your belly.” He turned his head slightly towards where I stood with

his treasurer, and a nod commanded the treasurer to count out the coins. Kailen took the proffered pouch as calmly as a man receiving payment for food, suggesting that, uniquely in my experience, his purses were of a not dissimilar amount.

Kailen's man, The Prince, was, I learned shortly afterwards, called so because he was an heir to the throne of Old Ceirad. He had the Old Kingdoms aristocracy in every bone, an educated, persuasive speaker. He also used Ladus's map and his blocks to explain his argument.

"Vilmor, as I have said, is comprised of seventy six fiefs. Your lands border eleven of those fiefs. Of those eleven there are three that matter. These three share a common ancestry with Hasike's clan. You will have noted how peaceful the border is there, compared to the Wilds and Razhani borders. Only Lagrad is more peaceful, and precisely because of your longstanding treaty.

"These three fiefs, comprising two clans, do not, shall we say, dine at the top table with Turis and the bigger fiefs. Indeed, he has seen fit to put to a vote the re-drawing of the fiefdoms in favour of a cousin whose land lies behind theirs. His mistake, as I see it, has been to give his cousin the oversight and control of levies, in the name of Turis, to see to the construction of the forts that now press against your borders, in those three lands.

"As many of you in the room will testify, if the Ladus here designated Hasike or anyone else to command your own men to build forts in the Ladus's name, irrespective of the cost to your lands and your harvests, you would be displeased." This earned a few grunts of approval.

"Two castles have been built, at great cost to those fiefs, seven other wooden forts and the construction of bridges through some of the marshlands that edge your borders give Vilmore the advantage of which we speak.

"I would suggest that the hundred gold pieces not be paid now, as I summarise our plan, but upon its execution. Will you bind to that, Ladus?"

SNAKEWOOD

You now understand how interesting these two mercenaries are. The Ladus is a great warrior, but a vain and ridiculous man. They understood this, as they must have understood Hasike's position as well as the intelligence they had gathered on the border before they approached Hasike and the Ladus. I was struck at that moment by the thought that one hundred and fifty gold pieces was not as preposterous as it initially seemed. Nor did Kailen's demeanour shift for a moment at this change in the agreement, as though it too had been rehearsed.

The Ladus looked about the room, and I noted Kailen's satisfaction. He had concluded much as I did, that this gesture indicated Ladus did not have the initiative or command here. He sought the faces of his clan leaders for their view on this offer, though it would have been madness to refuse.

"Explain your plan," he said.

The Prince continued. "Enfeoff the three clans, at the cost of one quarter of Hasike's own lands and four of his herds. Make also a gift to each clan of five hundred gold pieces, along with two hundred jars each of cocklebur seeds and the recipes for them. Commit also to fund a war commune there and give them a place on the council. In return..."

There were cries of 'Disgrace' and others much more colourful, but The Prince continued over them.

"In return you have extended your borders, united four clans that Hansike will soon get control of, gained two castles and a number of forts and weakened Turis considerably on this front."

Though the hubbub continued a moment, the Ladus raised his hand for silence.

"Hasike?" he said.

"I believe with some suitable marriages, the war commune in what remains of my territory and my family's lineage in respect of these clans, I and my sons after me will take overall control of these lands, though I expect, as The Prince has said, that they will accede to our offer willingly. I can commit from my own men

Adrian Selby

enough, with Kailen's help, to secure the castles while we secure the lands."

The Ladus nodded. Hasike had improved his standing immensely. He took some time, looking over the map, lost in thought.

"Return with the agreements and I will have the payments ready, both for those clans and these two mercenaries."

The territory was duly won, Kailen and The Prince were proved right.

I understand from some of the soldiers that I'd questioned regarding them that Kailen commands only a crew of twenty, and they have been making a name for themselves wherever they've signed. They have not yet signed a purse for a general that lost a battle.

I recommend an introduction, we may learn much from this remarkable man.

...the adventure continues in

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