

## *CHAPTER 2: Territory*

Crag anHolder, Ensign of Pak Viper and firstborne of Administrator Anselm anHolder, looked over his shoulder.

He seemed to be doing a lot of that these days. Saren enPath, his Right Hand, glared back at him as she road at an angle to his point position. Well, that was normal. She resented his assignment as Ensign, of course; they were both firstborne, but he had beaten her in a fair fight at the trial. Although it had been close. Aimed straight for his head, her flying kick had been a little high—a rash all-or-nothing blow—and he'd managed to dip beneath it. She'd not been able to check her follow-through motion, and, off balance, had fallen. When she landed, her hard fall knocking the breath out of her, he'd been able to pin her to the ground. And keep her pinned. Even with no air in her lungs, she had tried hissing at him in true Viper anger as he held her for the required ten breaths, his face close to hers. He knew she wanted to spit defiance, but even if she'd had her wind she could not have under the rules. Yet she wanted to; he admired that. And she was not unattractive. He had been acutely aware of her breasts pushing against his chest.

He reminded himself it was not the time to think about that. There were too many immediate dangers.

He raised his hand and the Viper cohort slowed to a halt. The oras snorted, tossed their heads, unhappy because they knew it was not yet time to stop for the night. Crag smoothed his hand along the neck of Vanas, murmured quietly to him until he settled. The other oras sensed that this was a decision and gradually, snuffling to each other, became still, waiting.

Dark clouds gathered to the west, spilling out from the edges of the eastern wall of Allera. A wind picked up and blew their cloaks around them. To the distant horizon, east and south spread the grasslands of Territory: endless. A vast space of restless air and prairie, the land dried and brown now at the end of this season of Polara. And, in places, the Lost River cut across the landscape like a knife; in others, twisting and lost from sight in shallow canyons, it drove eastward into the unknown.

At the edge of vision, to the south-west, he saw the faint gleam of the mysterious Lake of Misfortune. It had been the scene, 100 cycles ago, of the almost-complete massacre of Sandor enThal's expedition into Territory. Only 12 out of 1,500 cadres had managed to somehow stumble the many leagues back to the friendly confines of Allera, west beyond the wall. He winced for two reasons. First, it reminded him that this was forbidden knowledge, a holding of history that had been forced on him—along with an oath of secrecy—by the Hegemon. And second, he was here with less than 50 cadres on some mad mission into a huge, dangerous, windswept wilderness.

Even more bizarre was that he'd been given this much responsibility on his very first command as Ensign of Pak Viper.

“Sir?”

Crag felt a tug at his foot and looked down to Seth, his Appren, gazing up at him.

“There was no order to dismount!” he said sharply.

“But Ensign, Sir.” And Seth pointed to the dark clouds moving swiftly towards them.

“Ah,” he sighed then shouted, “Where's my Vane!”

“Here...Sir,” came a hesitant voice three oras back in the ranks.

“Up here. Now.”

There was a brief shuffle until Orab enElter, Vane of Pak Viper, was beside him, unwilling to meet his eyes. The Vane's long, thin face unsuccessfully attempted professional detachment.

Crag waved at the oncoming clouds. “What is this? What's happening?”

“Well, I—”

“Your cast this morning. Why wasn’t it true?”

The Vane shook his head. Crag saw he was confused and upset. An uneasy muttering drifted back through the ranks. These were good cadres, but most of them were young, barely past the recruit stage. He turned his head and grimaced into the wind. *Are we on this crazy mission because we’re expendable?* Crag knew he had to do something.

Instead of lowering his voice, he raised it so all could hear. “You are right, Vane of Pak Viper,” he said heartily.

The Vane looked up, startled. “Sir?”

“I said you’re right. In these unsettling times, when even lightfire comes unbidden, when Captain of Cadres Kell anStelar sends us out into the great unknown Territory to brave dangers that should never be faced without a legion of cadres, it is fitting that we be exact and correct in our actions.” And then in a very loud voice, “That we seek another Vane cast, so that our knowledge is the knowledge of Komp!”

That did it. “The knowledge of Komp! The knowledge of Komp!” rang through the entire Cadre, accompanied by vigorous nodding of heads and slapping of thickknives against shields.

He turned to Saren and said quietly, “You know what I’m doing.”

She nodded.

“Good. We’ll camp early at that grove of paperleaf up ahead. It’s near the river. We have to cross it at some point anyway. Take four and scout. Send one back. We’ll get settled, fix a shelter, get a new Vane cast, and figure out what to expect. I’ll be damned but I think it does look like a storm.”

“Right,” she said. “Better to accept what is than what should be.”

He nodded and felt a surge of gratitude that she was a Right Hand who could put personal resentments aside for the good of the cohort.

She called out three names and began to turn away.

“Saren!” he called after her.

She turned her head.

“Sharp eyes, sharp ears.”

Her dark eyes mocked him: “I know the motto, Ensign,” she said.

And then, with a laugh, she added the words on every Viper shield: “Death-Biter!” Her laughter trailed her as she moved away.

\*\*\*

Night was falling. The wind blew hard even within the grove’s shelter. Particles of sand penetrated cadre armor and oras hair, making both uncomfortable. Only in a pit hastily excavated in the very center of the ancient paperleaf trees was there any protection.

They huddled together in counsel: Crag along with his Appren Seth, who was curled up asleep at his feet, Saren his Right Hand, the two Pak Viper LongSpears, Rel enDan and Hwa enWin, and the still dour-looking Vane. Around them, cadres had finished a camp-rations meal and were preparing to bed down. Already guards had been set.

“So you found some traces of the T’s,” Crag asked Saren.

“Yes,” she nodded, tight-lipped. “One sign at the east edge, at least two moons old. The other, about two hundred steps from here, just over there.” She pointed southwest.

“How old?”

She shrugged. “Not old. Maybe three, four days.”

“Sir?” asked LongSpear Hwa.

“Speak, Hwa.” Already Crag felt comfortable enough with his new Pak to address each by his or her first name.

A slight smile turned the corners of the veteran Hwa’s mouth. “Sir. My question is, shouldn’t we be reporting back to the White Hills outposts? They’d want to know that there’s evidence of T’s this close. Especially at this time of the cycle. We don’t usually expect them now. Also, Sir, if I may...” He hesitated.

Crag nodded encouragingly: he wanted straight talk from his officers.

“Well. It’s the cadres. Now don’t get me wrong. I don’t think they’re a problem. These are good troops. But...they’re young. They wonder if Komp wants us out here. We hardly ever come into Territory. Never at this time of the cycle. Sir.”

Crag paused. He saw Saren watching, waiting to see how he would handle this.

“Hwa,” he said, finally, “I value your honesty. Always tell me what concerns the cadres. It’s important for all of us. As for Komp, understand that indeed She does approve of this Mission. Komp especially sent us on the Mission. I can tell you that directly from the Hegemon. In that sense, we are following Her direct orders.”

Hwa averted his eyes, obviously not yet completely convinced. The High Tek had not been mentioned. It was only the High Tek who directly communicated with Komp.

Crag spoke carefully. “I could not tell the cadres this before, Hwa. Our leaving Allera had to be kept secret. Even our destination. That’s why we can’t send a message back to the White Hills. And most important, Hwa, in answer to your unspoken question, I also received this official order direct from the new High Tek Teran—his first order as High Tek. And you know where he got it.”

Hwa swallowed. “I—thank you for telling us.” He glanced to his side at Rel, who coughed and asked, “The cadres, Sir?”

Crag nodded. “Yes. Tell them we’re following Komp’s orders. From the High Tek.”

Still the two LongSpears did not move.

“Rel?”

“Where are we going, Sir?”

Crag smiled. “I can’t tell you that yet, LongSpear. I need to consult with my Right Hand and the Vane. But tell the cadres that soon I’ll tell them more about our mission.” He didn’t mention that he’d been ordered not to reveal everything to the troops at any stage. But he wasn’t sure himself what he really ‘knew.’ Many of his instructions didn’t make much sense because they were simple to the point of vagueness. Like the map he’d been given. These were not comforting thoughts. So he said decisively, “See to the cadres.”

They both saluted, arms on chest, and moved away.

Saren at first said nothing; she moved closer and put her hand lightly on Seth’s tousled head, his hair dirty with twigs, sand, and bits of leaves. She began to pick them out.

Overhead, the wind rattled the paperleaf trees' flat, dry leaves; sometimes a gust hurled itself through the top of the grove like a wild animal. It was getting dark rapidly. And colder. Out here on the great plain of Territory, at the transition from Polara to Primera, it could easily freeze at night if the sky were clear.

Crag looked up. Black clouds scudded across the dome of heaven as the light failed. Maybe, if it got cold enough, it might even snow.

They were in 'cover-camp,' meaning no fires. He shivered, pulling his riding cloak around him. Saren looked calm, at peace as she stroked Seth's hair. He had a moment of anger at her; she should know better, treating an Appren like he was still in creche. But then he realized that his real emotion was one of envy. He still remembered the peace and security of creche. Not that many cycles ago his friends had all been there...Teran, Kell, Marin, Tonor, himself, Saren.

He shook himself. "Vane," he said, his voice edged with anger.

Orab enElter looked up, immediately apprehensive.

"Well? What's your explanation?"

The Vane tried to put on a brave front. "I'm not certain to what the Ensign is referring." And then he added carefully, "Sir."

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. The bloody weather. Just because I let you off in front of the cadres don't think I don't want some answers. Last night you gave us a cast of good weather. Now—" he pointed straight up.

As if in response to his gesture, thick, fat, wet flakes of snow began drifting out of the dark sky, melting as they settled on the encampment.

"Rain or snow," Crag muttered, "we get wet. But you specifically said 'warm, clear, dry.' How is it that a Vane can be wrong? You've been with Pak Viper for 10 cycles; surely your reliable record...I don't understand. Explain."

Orab sighed. "I wish I could, Ensign. Explain, that is." He spread his hands in the near-darkness, his thin face invisible beneath his Vane hood. His voice was slow, measured: "Truth is—well, what is the truth? All I can tell you is what I know. Last night I performed the prescribed rituals for the weathercast—as indeed I have, with complete exactness, every night since we left Allera."

Saren nodded. "That is true, Crag. He's not been wrong before."

"But he should never be wrong!" His voice carried, and those nearby looked up.

Orab moved his hands up and down. "Please, Ensign Crag. The cadres. They're young and not that experienced. You saw how nervous they became in lateday when we stopped. The less uncertainty they know, the better."

Crag grunted. "You speak truth, Vane. I'm sorry. Well. Go on."

But Saren spoke instead, in almost a whisper, so he had to lean forward.

"Things are not as always," she said. "I've noticed the lightfire come too often. I have noticed that, even in Allera itself, the weathercast has not always been right. Not this much out, as today. But enough that the Vane of Allera is less precise in what she predicts—perhaps so as not to be seen as wrong if it doesn't work out."

"You speak truth as well, Saren," Orab whispered back. "These signs have been noted by some few who watch carefully. Soon, more will notice. I don't know what it means. The Vanetek Council has been aware of...problems. At first we thought it was some of us who had lost our ability. But there have been too many instances I cannot tell you of the ritual, but it has been followed with no errors; every connection to Komp has been observed to the letter of the Law. The cast has been received. And given. Unaltered, exactly as it has been received. Such an action would be blasphemy anyway."

Crag hissed, “Then how explain this?”

Orab sighed. “No explanation. I don’t know. *We* don’t know. There are those who say Komp is displeased with us, that She will punish us in the womb of uncertainty.”

They were silent, thinking on this. Crag could not imagine a world whose major principles were unpredictable—arbitrary, unknown, and therefore uncontrollable. It made him feel sick.

“The womb of uncertainty,” Saren breathed. “My creche-mother would threaten me that I would go there when it was my time to leave. I used to have terrible nightmares. And in them I could rely on nothing, no one.”

Seth stirred, opened his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Appren,” Crag said. “Go back to sleep.”

“No, Sir, something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Crag turned quickly to Orab. “Vane. I want you to get the instruments ready. Perform another cast. Do it here, away from the rest of the Pak.” The Vane nodded. He moved to the other end of the pit and covered himself with the cloak. Soon they could see flickers of blue light forming under its edge.

Seth’s mouth dropped.

“Appren Seth, it is blasphemy to observe.”

The boy turned his head. Crag whispered to Saren, “We’ll keep lookout from the top of the pit.”

She saluted two fingers that he could barely see in the snow-filled dark.

They climbed up to the edge of the depression and unhooked shortswords. The rest of the camp was a dim collection of white mounds around them. No one moved. The oras were vague, snuffling shapes just outside the clearing, inside the first circle of trees. Wind swirled sticky snowflakes over them, blew against their faces. The creaks and groans of snow-laden paperleaf came unpredictably from one direction, then another.

Crag was uneasy. He could not stop thinking about that recent Tcamp, so close.

A sharp crack made them both jump. Saren touched his arm. He breathed deeply, whispered, “It’s ok, probably too much snow on the leaves and a branch snapped. Remember when we were with Pak Hawkra last cycle? Those sounds in the Virg Forest? I don’t know about you, but they scared the hell out of me.” He laughed under his breath. “Had no idea a cycle later I’d be Ensign with Viper. That we’d be here.”

“Shss!” Saren hissed. “What was that?”

He listened for a moment, then said, “Nothing. Probably more trees.”

“No. Something else.”

He listened intently now, trying to filter out the sounds of the storm and the restless, burdened paperleaf. The sharp snow-laden air had him awake, clear-headed. He actually liked it out here in Territory, especially during Polara when the air was like a tonic. The cold filled his senses. He felt strong, alert.

Yet as he sensed the quiet camp and restless grove of trees around them, he still heard nothing strange. “Give me a clue.”

“I don’t know exactly. Just listen.”

Again he heard only the storm at the edge of his awareness. He turned to Saren. “Weren’t you a Listener after Pak Hawkre, when you were in Pak Falco? Is that why they put you with me again now?”

She didn’t speak; instead, covered his mouth with her strong hand. His immediate reaction was anger. How dare she! Would he have to constantly reassert his authority over her?

Then he heard it.

The sound tightened the muscles at the back of his neck. But he could not quite make it out.

Saren whispered, “I hear it clearly. That faint howl, whine. Sounds like a signal of some kind. But what *is* it? I don’t really know the animals out here. Sounds like a...is that a hyra?”

The word was a hit of adrenalin. He grabbed her and threw her down. She spat, “What the—”

“Stay down!” he hissed. “That’s no hyra. It’s an attack signal!”  
And then, at the top of his voice he yelled: “T ATTACK!”

They were young but well trained. On conditioning alone, jolted into consciousness, they threw off their snow-covered field cloaks and were up, quickly forming the famous Viper triad, backs to each other, groups of three longswords pointed outward even as the first dark shapes crashed out of the night. And these were definitely Territorials: huge, towering monsters with the all-too-familiar horns, their scythe blades sweeping down to set off the first cries of terror and pain.

Crag yelled at Saren, “The pit!” He tried to move back to where the Vane and Seth were partly hidden but unprotected.

This proved impossible; monstrous shapes interceded. They bellowed a deep reverberating howl, animal-like, as they fought. The huge head, the horns, the snout...he could dimly make these out even as he reacted on instinct to the first blade, ducked, swung quickly back behind the T and ran it through. He had trained his cadres in this maneuver; it was the best way to fight T’s. Get under them, behind them: strike. But you had to be faster than they were. Something so bulky should have been much slower, but they were remarkably agile for their size, often fatally quick. Ordinary Allerans, when they thought of them at all, had a belief that there was something supernatural about the Territorials. It was something that had to be drilled out of a cadre’s mind if he or she were to survive out here.

Crag saw what looked like Zarn alTheros, one of his newest recruits, step back, wait for the sweep of the T’s scything blade, then move forward, ducking, beginning his turn. But his timing was off. The T’s blade descended. Before Crag could shout or even move a step towards him, it sliced into Zarn, burying itself with a terrible sound against bone in his neck. The young man’s head flopped forwards. This was all Crag could see in the dim night. Blood must be spurting—but he didn’t have time to move towards Zarn as there was a grunt to his left and animal-like breath over him. Fear jolted him and he spun 180 degrees, at the same time bringing his longsword around with him at right angles to his body. He felt the air move at the edge of his ear. The feel of the blade—hard metal death—passed by. His sword buried itself into the side of the T, who bellowed a horrible strangled pain. And fell.

Crag’s momentum carried him past the T and almost into another two dancing blades. He could sense Saren even as she whirled away, crying her high-pitched battle song within the harsh clash of metal on metal.

But his left foot went out from under him. The ground was now mud, the snow falling more heavily. Bodies grunted, grappled. He tried to right himself but there was nothing to stop his slide, and he fell over the edge of the pit, tumbling down to the bottom; his face eventually buried in wet earth.

When he shook himself free, he could at first see nothing. Finally he made out, dimly, linear flickers of blue light. Good. That meant the Vane was still safe, still performing the cast. And Seth? There seemed to be no one else in the pit. Above them were the continuing sounds of battle.

As he scrambled to his feet, a searing white bar of light suddenly crossed above, followed by horrible screaming. Shock jolted him. As the brief flash burned into his eyes, he saw the paperleaf trees, the pit, the cloaked figure of the Vane, the

shapes of friend and foe in combat frozen against the dark above the sides of the pit. Then everything went black except for the white afterburn that blazed in his eyes.

He was blind! He threw his hands forwards instinctively, put his left foot out to keep him upright. And flailed his sword. Komp help anyone, T or cadre, within his reach!

Gradually, sight returned, and he calmed.

Breathing heavily, he became aware of a deathly quiet from the combatants: within this lull, there was only the sighing wind and the sloppy snow. And no blue slice of light where the Vane had been.

Crag waited ten breaths, then yelled: “Vipers!” No response. He shouted again, louder this time: “Pak Viper!!”

After a pause, from the top edge of the pit came Saren’s voice, sounding weak, as if from a distance. “Ensign. Up here.”

“Status?” he called back. “The bannershield? Tell Hwa I want a cadres’ report.”

“Cadre Hwa has...left, Sir”

“Ah,” he kicked the dirt with his toe.

“But the Ts, Ensign.”

“What about them?”

“They have retreated. Their dead have left too, Sir.”

*Yes, good.* He began slogging his way up the side of the pit. Saren pulled him the last stride.

“How many?”

“Not sure. Five cadres so far. Longspear Rel is looking.”

Suddenly he remembered. “Komp!” he swore. “Seth. Where is Seth?”

From behind Saren a short figure, dimly visible in the dark and snow, stepped out and said, “I got one, Sir! I ducked like you said and cut it on the knee, and when it bent down I buried my blade in its back. Then it left.” His voice quavered, but Seth stood forth bravely.

*Thank you, Komp.* Out loud Crag said, “Well done, Appren! You will be cut when we are safe.”

“Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir!”

There was a sudden shout off to their right. Dim light was beginning to shape a horizon to the east. Shadows of trees and men took vague form. He could barely make out arms waving like the appendages on some strange monster creature. More voices were added—he sensed fear, agitation, near-hysteria.

He grabbed Saren’s arm, pulled her along. “Come.” She pulled away from him but followed. They stumbled over old roots and windfall until they stood within a circle of gesticulating cadres. What he saw on the ground was a body, as Taria enLok, a cadre brave enough or fearful enough to ignore what she had been taught, held a dim lightstick over it.

Vipers backed away, many of them choking on their own breath, as Crag forced himself to kneel down and look. Yes, it was a body.

Then Saren spoke the unspoken madness. “It—it didn’t leave.”

For a moment his mind went blank, uncomprehending. Then he remembered the Virg Forest. Bodies that didn't leave; Vanes that couldn't weathercast. More and more this trip into Territory was beginning to resemble that ill-fated expedition. Somehow, in all his doubt and shocked hesitation, he grasped that he must not freeze, must somehow give the cadres a meaning. Even if it meant using his authority to suppress their panic.

But there was worse. Crag grabbed the lightstick from Taria's trembling fingers and held it close to the body. Silence fell, save for the sighing of wind through the paperleaf. There was long, thick hair all over it and a gigantic head with the familiar horns protruding. The snout. The hair was animal; the head was animal.

"It's not real," Saren whispered fiercely, spat to the side. "It's wearing something on its head. Take it off." Then, when, still stupefied, he did not move, she reached towards the body on the ground.

But before she touched it—*how is she so brave, or foolish?*—he could suddenly move again and think. "No," he said. "Let me." He handed her the lightstick and reached to hesitantly touch the alien monster. There was a collective gasp from the Pak: none of them had ever seen a T this close, let alone touched one. Even the bodies of their own always left after death in battle, before anyone had a chance to exam them.

But not this one, not this time. It was here, and he touched it.

They waited for him to die and leave. Because in a tale in *The Book of Stories*, the hero Neriath had touched a dead T, one that had not left. Then Neriath had left, condemned by Komp to exist in utter darkness—awake and aware, forever.

Nothing happened.

So he cautiously pulled on the monster head—and it gave. Slowly, he pulled it off. Then took a deep breath as Saren bent close with the lightstick. She dropped it, fell back, gasping.

A muted wail went up from those in Pak Viper close enough to see.

Crag picked up the stick, held it. And saw the face of—

Lightning raced through him so hot he thought he would burn.

It was the face, not of an obscene monster, but of a young man, scarcely cycles out of his boyhood.

A face not all that different from Seth's.