



# PATH OF HONOR, PATH OF BLOOD

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Lord Rikard Kozlov, Viscount of Scarsgrad, strode the length of the village in the early light, the arcane turbine of his warcaster armor sending out plumes of smoke. His Iron Fang kapitan kept pace alongside him. Since he and his forces had left Occupied Llael to check on his estate, rumors of trollkin attacks against the Ruscar north of his ancestral home had grown thicker.

Unlike their more aggressive western cousins, these Ruscar tribes depended on herding and hunting for their livelihood. So long as there was no unrest, most Khadoran nobles left the Ruscar to themselves, but neither did they put any effort into their protection. This was not Kozlov's way, nor had it been his father's. Gunder Kozlov had instilled in young Rikard a strong sense of duty after claiming the child as his heir. The half-Ruscar youth had in turn dedicated himself to his station. He may have been born and raised in a rustic village, but he was viscount of these lands, and he would fulfill his obligations to *all* his people.

The village of Enden had already weathered several brutal raids, and hunters reported the trollkin were coming again, in number. Soldiers and tribal warriors alike were rushing to prepare defenses. Around them, the world was still washed in grey, the snowy ground barely discernible from the fog shrouding the trees. A short distance to the south, the tribe's square-faced northern sheep huddled in their pens, oblivious to the impending battle.

Kozlov and Kapitan Runakovich had met with the Ruscar charged with defending the large flock. If the tribe lost many more of the animals, they would never survive the winter. The viscount had left a lieutenant and one

unit of Iron Fangs at the pens, which were situated away from the trees on ground overlooking the village.

Elrik, the tribe's chieftain, approached out of the fog. "A fine day to fight!" he said, offering bowls of steaming black broth to the pair. The man's weathered face and sinewy arms were so heavily tattooed with the tribe's wolf totem that they appeared blue, but his expression was warm.

The officers took the bowls and nodded in thanks as the three walked toward the edge of the village that faced the forest. Runakovich sipped with a determined expression, but Kozlov lingered over his. Smelling the sharply scented broth was like breathing in his childhood. "You think every day is a fine day to fight, old man," he said.

Elrik nodded at his friend, but his expression turned serious. "True, but I admit I am unsettled. The signs point to a dark day for my people."

Runakovich swallowed a mouthful of broth. "Your messenger said the trollkin brought full-blood trolls last time," she said. "That doesn't sound like raiding."

"The year has been difficult. Our flock is one of the few left in the region large enough to feed a hungry kriel," the chief said. "Raiding has turned into war. The trolls they bring are fierce brutes, difficult to kill."

"Even so, not even full-blood trolls can stand up to Khadoran warjacks," Kozlov said. "They will retreat once they see the futility of fighting. The trollkin will not taste victory today!"

Elrik stopped and faced Kozlov. "I hope it is as you say," he said. "But something stirs the blood of the kriels. They mean to drive my people from these lands."

The viscount's expression darkened. "I will not let that happen."

As they neared the northern edge of the village, shapes rose out of the mist. Iron Fangs waited in a loose line, tower shields and blasting pikes ready. Ruscar men and women were scattered behind them, clad in light furs and cloaks, tattoos evident wherever arms and necks were bare. Most carried knives and bronze-banded clubs, but some wielded sturdy spears.

Born with the rare warcaster talent, Kozlov could sense his warjacks before he could see them nearer the trees where the trollkin would emerge. At full steam, both towering machines were restless and ready for action. Behind

them the village's huts hovered above the frozen ground on stilts. Only the chieftain's hall at their center, now occupied by the tribe's youngest and oldest, was stout and defensible.

"Are the archers in place?" Kozlov asked as he set aside his empty bowl, and Elrik pointed to the villagers posted along the rooftops. Some carried short hunting bows, while others had slings to hurl stones. Kozlov nodded, and the two men clasped forearms.

"Gods willing, tonight we will feast our victory. Fight well, my lord," said the chieftain. The honorific did not go unnoticed by Kozlov, who wore his father's nobility uneasily.

"Fight well, brother," answered Kozlov. In the Ruscar tradition, all tribe members were related in battle. That this was not the village he had known as a youth mattered not at all.



The warriors defending the village were awash in enemies. Trollkin had rushed from the trees in full fury and now pressed hard with axes and spears, seeking to overwhelm the defenders. It was a terrifying sight, and Kozlov could understand how the lines had broken the last time these foes clashed. His first sight of a full-blood troll came as one called a bouncer charged forward to tear through Iron Fangs and Ruscar alike with its long flail, as unstoppable as a thunderstorm. Even as the warriors reeled, Kozlov sent his warjacks to support them. He gestured toward his Decimator, glowing blue runes appearing around his hand as he sent his power into the great machine. He ordered it forward to fire its cannon. An oversized slug that would have annihilated a man sank into the shoulder of the troll bouncer. The beast staggered, bellowing, but did not fall. The ten-ton Decimator advanced to finish it, revving its rip saw.

More trolls were coming, several armed with axes and another behind them wielding a long spear. Splitting his attention between his two warjacks, Kozlov pointed at the Juggernaut, and the runes around his hand shimmered and shifted. He sharpened his rage to a point and sent it through his mental connection with the machine, which stomped its feet and broke into a run toward the trolls. Every step shook snow from the trees.

Additional trollkin rushed up from the direction of the pens at the south end of the village. Expecting easy access to the livestock while the bulk of the village dealt with the main assault, they had instead encountered well-armed defenders. The distinctive sounds of warjacks in battle had drawn their attention, and now they came in support of their comrades. The Iron Fangs at the pens rushed to reposition in front of the reinforcements.

“Shield wall!” Runakovich shouted. The Iron Fangs stepped forward as one and locked their tower shields together to form a solid barrier in front of the oncoming raiders.

The momentum of the onrushing trollkin was too strong to turn away. They crashed into the wall of shields swinging their great axes, but the weapons rang off the red-painted steel as arrows and stones rained down from the archers above. Several trollkin went down with arrows planted in their eyes or throats. The troll axers bellowed and charged the shield wall at full speed, sweeping their axes in wide arcs and knocking back several Iron Fangs at once. The wall was broken. The Iron Fangs to either side regrouped, pikes at the ready, though with their formation shattered they had lost their advantage.

Further up the line, the Juggernaut had just killed an axer when a pair of raiders charged it from the other side. Unfazed by their blows, the warjack easily sliced one in half with its mighty ice axe, but more came on. Soon the ’jack was surrounded by enemies shouting battle cries and smashing their weapons against its heavy armor.

A troll impaler’s spear flew into a knee joint of the warjack, which vented a roar of protest as it stumbled momentarily. At Runakovich’s order, several Iron Fangs charged the impaler, the first detonating the charge in the tip of his blasting pike to knock the troll back and onto the ground, where the others finished it.

Confident the Juggernaut could endure for a time against the trollkin, Kozlov looked through the Decimator’s eyes to find a higher priority target. He could see a large trollkin female fighting along his right flank, shouting to the attacking forces as she lay about her with her bloody axe. The ground around her was littered with the bodies of fallen Ruscar. He did not need to see officer’s insignia to recognize her as a commander.

He compelled the Decimator to fire on her as it closed the distance between them, and the cannon’s boom drowned out the tumult for a heartbeat. With surprising speed, a nearby troll bouncer dove in front of

the commander, its tall shield intercepting the cannon slug. She shouted orders to her warriors, pointing at the warjack.

These trollkin barreled toward the Decimator, their great axes ready to bite into its armor. The warjack met them with its rip saw, and trollkin blood and limbs rained down on the nearby warriors. If all they faced were trollkin with hand weapons, the day would quickly be won.

Bellowing a primal challenge, a pair of troll axers charged at the Decimator, slamming into it one after the other. The first impact sent the heavy warjack tottering; the second knocked it back to fall with an earth-shaking crash and a howl of venting steam, crushing several trollkin beneath tons of tempered steel. As it struggled to regain its feet more trollkin converged, joining the axers in raining heavy blows onto thick Khadoran steel. The warjack would not last long, though Kozlov hoped it could destroy one of the axers, if not both, before being overwhelmed.

Aware he needed to take out the enemy commander before he lost the Decimator as well, Kozlov raced toward her, drawing deeply on his mystical energy to overboost his power field. He mentally ordered the Juggernaut to join him, and it tore free of the trollkin surrounding it, trampling over two that failed to get clear.

Hearing a bestial roar, Kozlov turned just in time to duck under the spinning flail of the troll bouncer. As he straightened, from the corner of his eye he saw Elrik take a hand axe to the chest. Rage flared within him. The bouncer slung the massive spiked ball back at the warcaster with a double-handed downward heave. Sparks exploded from Kozlov's power field as the blow crashed through it and hammered into his left pauldron, driving him back a step. Ignoring the pain, he surged forward to strike out with his great axe, Lesovik, which bit into the right arm of the bouncer as the beast raised its weapon again. The troll howled in agony, and the flail fell from its numbed hand. Fighting through the trollkin in an effort to reach Elrik, Kozlov blocked several more blows before he felt the sting of a wound and the warmth of his own blood running down one leg.

The blue glow of runes made a brilliant nimbus around the warcaster and the Juggernaut, prompting both Ruscar and trollkin to stare in awe. The trollkin commander raised her axe even as her injured bouncer intercepted the oncoming Juggernaut. The warjack's tremendous ice axe swung down, biting through the troll's armor and deep into its shoulder. Ice sprang from

the wound to sheathe the bouncer's upper body, freezing it in place. The 'jack swung again, this time cleaving the bouncer's head from its neck.

Enraged, the trollkin commander unleashed a war cry and struck, but Kozlov was able to twist away. He returned the strike and Lesovik sang out true, cutting through the commander's torso and spilling her entrails on the ground.

A large trollkin body hurtled through the air to crash into the last wounded axer, sending it staggering, and Kozlov felt a rush of satisfaction from the Juggernaut, which had used the trollkin as a projectile. The warcaster again drew on his arcane power, and glowing runes manifested around his hand as he thought of Elrik's fall and the plight of his tribe. An unnatural wind rose up around him. He focused his wrath, shaping it into something as sharp as any blade, and then with one gesture sent it hurtling toward the axer. The beast roared as the wind sliced through it in a single, powerful slash. Deprived of both their commander and their full-blood trolls, the remaining trollkin broke and ran for the forest.



"Next time, we feast," the old man said.

Kozlov laughed, his smile reflected in the faces of the warriors crowding the chieftain's hall. Soldiers in Khadoran red tended their injured on one side of the room; Ruscar in furs and earth-colored cloth did likewise on the other. Elrik lay on furs in the center of the hall, his chest tightly bound and his face pale beneath the tattoos. His grandson, who had earned his first war badge in the battle, watched him with worried eyes.

Seeing the youth, Kozlov sobered. Many had died to preserve these lands. The village would survive, but their greater fight would continue. And he would be at their side.

The warcaster leaned down to gently clasp Elrik's forearm and said, "Next time. I will not forget."

"No," whispered Elrik. He tapped his own chest and then Kozlov's. "You cannot forget where your heart lives."

