

STATE OF GRACE

A WOLF DASHER NOVEL



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Chapter 1: The Sons of Frey **(Two Weeks before Revelation Day)**

Sara Wensley-James spurred the stolen horse, urging him to weave his way faster through the decaying trees in the hope of eluding her pursuers. The great, black stallion whinneyed in protest, but he responded to her commands. His hooves pounded the dry earth, picking their way through the detritus of fallen branches and dead ground cover, eluding trees.

She chanced a look behind her. She could make out at least three more riders. They were covered in white robes – the color of death in elfin culture. Their heads were enshrouded by white hoods, but she knew who they were: the Sons of Frey. They were determined to prevent her from reporting what she knew.

One stood up in his stirrups and aimed a bow at her. She put herself low in the saddle and hoped the arrow would whistle over her.

The shot never came, though. After a moment, she risked another glance behind. The would-be bowman had been unseated by a low-hanging branch before he could fire. That gave Sara an idea. She pulled on the reins to slow her mount.

Within seconds, the other two riders closed the distance. One drew an arrow and started fitting it to a bow. The other crouched low and urged more speed from his horse. As he got closer, he put his hand forward to try to grab her reins.

With a quick kick of her spurs, she pulled away. Then she reached out for a tree. Without thought, she summoned her Shadow powers and slapped the trunk as she went by, releasing Shadow from her hands. Instantly, the already dying tree rotted both up and down. After a few seconds, the weight of its branches was too great. It snapped in half and crashed down on her pursuers just as they were passing. One was crushed; the archer was knocked off his horse to an uncertain fate.

“Hah!” Sara said aloud, pleased with the results of her trickery.

Presently, an arrow shot past her face, narrowly missing her. She turned her head and saw five more riders, all preparing to launch arrows at her.

“Oh, hell,” she said.

She pulled sharply on the reins and moved her mount away, coaxing him to his best speed. Behind her came a chorus of twangs. Sara laid low and tried to melt into the horse’s back. She heard a series of thunks as the missiles struck trees instead of her.

“Come on, boy!” she shouted to the horse, begging him to get her to safety.

He danced between one dying tree and another as Sara searched for some place to hide, some way to escape those who would kill her. The putrescent forest offered nothing, though. Blackened tree after rotting bush gave no shelter to an Urlish Shadow trying to report to her superiors.

An arrow struck a tree to her right – and this one came from in front of her. Sara pulled on the reins, bringing the poor, tired horse to a halt. Sure enough, three more riders were up ahead and closing in.

She couldn't go left. That way led to the large clearing between here and Al-Adan. She could only go right – effectively back the way she'd come. Before she had a moment to consider the risks of that plan, though, she spied more Sons of Frey approaching from that direction. She was trapped.

They had been flushing her. They pursued from three directions to move her to the edge of the forest. Now, they intended to force her out into the open. With no trees for cover, their arrows were much more likely to find their target.

“Damn,” she cursed.

There was nothing for it. She had to take the route they gave her. With luck, she could get a good enough head start she could outrun them to Al-Adan.

She pulled on the reins and spurred the big, black horse into action again. Gritting her teeth, she charged for the edge of the forest. As it approached, she could feel her heart starting to race harder. She'd been scared during the chase through the dead woods, but she'd had her wits and her skill to help her. Now, she had nothing but whatever speed her stolen mount had left.

“You can do it, boy,” she whispered to him.

She held her breath as they emerged from the trees and broke out across open ground. She dug her spurs into his sides to let him know it was time for his best. He protested again, but picked up his pace to a full gallop.

The earth outside the woods was just as blasted as within. Hard, bare ground was cracked from lack of moisture, and only the hardiest of plants grew. In the distance, she could see Al-Adan rising up from the desolation. It was a long way off, and she wondered if the giant, black horse had enough energy to make it.

She stole another glance behind and spotted no one. Surely the Sons of Frey should have reached the edge of the forest by now. Where were they?

Sara looked left and right to see if a new group of pursuers had taken up the chase, but there was nothing. After a moment, she allowed the horse to slow, hoping to conserve his energy.

She looked back again. No riders emerged from the trees.

It couldn't be this easy. They had flushed her out. They were not about to just let her go free now.

Sara stood up in the stirrups and searched every direction of the wasteland for some trap or incoming attack. She was about to relax, think she had maybe gotten away, when she spotted the new threat. In the sky, a lone man was barreling towards her on a flying carpet. He was crouched low, his cloak snapping in the wind like a flag. She didn't need to make out his features to know who it was.

“Oh, hell,” she said. “Ravager.”

Ravager – the Phrygian Shadow consorting with the Shendali terrorists pursuing her. Sara was suddenly very afraid. She'd rather face the Sons of Frey.

“Go!” she shouted at the horse and dug her spurs in savagely. He took off at a bolt, but it was no use. Ravager closed the distance quickly. His magic carpet had greater speed than an exhausted stallion.

She risked a look back and saw the vicious smile in his eyes. His hand was upraised, and she knew what was coming next. A black ball of Shadow formed on his hand, and he hurled it at her.

“If you want to live, you better run like hell,” Sara said.

She needn't have done so. The horse was running for its life now. He perceived the wrongness of Ravager's missile and knew he didn't want to be near.

The ball of Shadow bounced along the ground in pursuit of them. Despite the beast's terror, Sara spurred him to go faster.

Miraculously, they outran the dark death pursuing for them. It just couldn't keep up.

But Ravager wasn't done. He came down low, so he was hugging the ground and pulled alongside them.

“Hello, Ms. Wensley-James,” he said in his thick, Phrygian accent. His blue eyes mocked her, as did his cruel smile. “Thees charade has come to an end.”

Sara reached for a dagger to hurl at him, but she never got a chance. Ravager fired another of his dark missiles at them, and this time he was too close to miss. The ball of death struck her mount in its neck. It opened a savage maw and began ravaging the poor beast. He stumbled as blood flew from his neck, and Sara was thrown forward.

She landed roughly on the hard ground. Pain shot through her shoulder as she tumbled forward. She rolled for twenty feet before finally coming to a halt. When she stopped, she was certain she'd broken her collarbone, and she had skin missing from several places. She tried to stand but couldn't do it. She wondered if she'd broken a leg or maybe her back as well.

She looked back at the stolen horse. He was dead, but Ravager's monstrous thing continued tearing his flesh apart. Above her, Ravager circled around on his flying carpet, making his way back towards her. She was about to meet a similar fate.

Sara couldn't let the mission fail. Just because she was dead didn't mean she couldn't stop them. She had an ability Ravager didn't know about, and she had just enough time to use it.

He came barreling in on her, his hand raised to fling another of his deadly balls of Shadow at her. But he wasn't the only one with Shadow at his disposal.

She put her hand to the earth and called up in her mind the image of her controller, Kenderbrick. When Sara had the woman firmly fixed in her mind. She expelled Shadow from her hand, sending it to Kenderbrick with a single-word message.

With the information away, she smiled. Ravager had failed. She'd gotten a message to her superiors. Urland would benefit from her work.

Ravager let fly with her doom. It took only two bounces to reach her. She screamed as it tore the flesh from her body.

In Al-Adan, Cassius Morningdew gathered his courage. He stared at the bustling elves in the market and wondered if he was doing the right thing. He wasn't afraid to die, but should he really murder his own people?

Here was a woman with two children inspecting pomegranates. There was a man doing his best to sell sugared dates. None of them knew what was coming. They were just trying to get on with the business of life. Was it really fair to murder them?

But as his will began to waver, he saw something else. A group of human soldiers strolled imperiously through the market. They brazenly examined the wares offered for sale and stared at every passing elf, as though the humans were the ones who belonged here, not the elves.

Cassius felt flames of rage lick his soul. These interlopers were ruining the country and the people he loved. Frey had told the elves they were God's special people, put on Earth to bring enlightenment to all others. But here were humans – occupiers – telling elves how to govern themselves, insisting elfin magic be provided to them, and enforcing their will by the sword. It was the humans who despoiled the land and caused the schism between elves that led glorious Alfheim to split into two nations.

And it was the decadent Freyalans in Alfar who continued to consort with this corrupt race, condoning their crimes. The humans deserved death, but so did any elf who willingly collaborated with them. There was only one way to save elfkind and rid the human stench from their nation. The Urlish dogs had to be made to see that Alfar was not worth the cost in lives to occupy, and his people had to be made to understand the humans cannot be tolerated.

His mentor, the leader of the Sons of Frey, Starfellow, spoke of a state of grace. It cannot be achieved, he counseled, while humans and elves mix. But, Starfellow told him, sacrificing oneself in the name of elfin purity brought one to grace. A martyr found the fellowship of both Frey and God on the other side.

Morningdew set his jaw. He knew what he had to do.

With an angry look at the revolting humans, he pulled up the hood of his white robe. Then he withdrew the special wand Starfellow gave him. He said a quick prayer to Frey, asking him to watch over his family.

“*Eradico*,” he said and waved the wand.

He never saw what happened next. His body became a living bomb and blew apart, sending destructive eldritch energy in every direction. He'd have been satisfied with the results, though. Fifty people were killed, including all of the humans. Carts caught fire. Three buildings were partially destroyed. And there was great weeping from the survivors.

Chapter 2: Shadow Six **(Twelve Days before Revelation Day)**

Wolf Dasher feinted to his left, then slashed to the right with a move that would have taken Chelsea Chandler's head off if his sword had been real and her reflexes poorer. Instead, she brought her own wooden sword up and checked his blow. Then she twisted her wrist, got on top of his sword, and forced it down. She tried to follow with an uppercut to his neck, but he stepped back and swatted her sword away from him.

"Very nice," she said. "Two months ago, I'd have connected with that counterstrike."

"I got tired of the bruises," he replied with a grin.

"That's good," she said. "In the field, it wouldn't be a bruise. It would be a potentially fatal slice to your neck."

She lunged again, forcing Wolf to parry. Damn, but she was fast. Chelsea Chandler was easily the best trainer Wolf had ever had. She found his weaknesses, exploited them, and then taught him how to prevent a real opponent from doing the same. She was incredibly gifted.

She was also very beautiful. She was tall and lean and had a prodigious chest that Wolf found extremely distracting while he was trying to fight her. During these training sessions, she wore a tight smock that was cut low, and her breasts regularly threatened to fall out. Wolf often wondered if she did this on purpose, and if the distraction they caused wasn't the real reason she could find weaknesses in his swordplay.

She parried another of his strikes, knocking him temporarily off balance. As he tripped forward, he got a good look at those breasts and saw sweat trickling between them. He ducked a haymaker aimed at his head and moved back out of her range.

"Come on, Wolf," she taunted. "You can do better than that."

He refocused his mind and circled her, looking for an opening. She was right; it was time for him to be more serious.

Seeing an opportunity, he attacked. She parried again, and they danced around the floor hacking at each other. Chelsea ducked low, giving Wolf an opening. He brought his sword crashing down at her, but he realized too late she was feinting again. She knocked his sword back at him, opening up his inside line. Then, quick as lightning, she struck him in the neck. He gasped in pain and dropped his sword, clutching the welt she'd raised.

"Damn, Chelsea!" he cursed. "That hurt!"

"It would have hurt more, if it had been a real sword," she said. "Or maybe not. Maybe you'd have been beheaded and never known what happened until you woke up in Heaven."

"You know I'm an atheist, Chelsea," he said. "And if there is a God and an afterlife, I doubt I'm going to Heaven."

"That's beside the point, Wolf," she replied. "That was a sloppy attack that could cost you your life on a mission. When you're bringing that big finisher, make sure you're using two hands. It gives you more power and protects you better. I was able to counter your attack,

because you one-handed it, exposing your neck. If you'd had two hands on the sword, I wouldn't have been able to open you up like that.

"This isn't like you. You've been fighting sloppily for weeks. What's going on, Shadow Seven," she asked.

Wolf was an agent in Urland's Shadow Service. The term, "Shadow," referred both to people who possessed strange, dark magical powers and to the energy itself. His code name indicated he was a Shadow and that his field rank was number seven. Rank was determined by power and experience. When someone above you died, you moved up a level or two. Wolf had been "promoted" sixteen times since joining Her Majesty's Shadow Service. It was a dangerous job.

"I'm bored," he admitted. "I haven't had an assignment in nearly a year, and I'm going stir crazy. All I do is train and read briefs. I'm dying for some action."

Chelsea nodded sadly.

"All you Shadows want to be out in the field," she said. "You can't stand it when you have to wait for something to happen. Something about that dark energy flowing through you makes you crave being close to death."

"I don't like being close to death," Wolf protested.

"You constantly put your life in danger," she countered. "You take huge risks in the name of the Crown. I suspect many of you don't mind when the end comes. You're released from your agony."

Wolf tried to look at her and found he couldn't. Something about what she said struck a nerve.

"You try being a freak in the eyes of normal people," he said. "Try being ostracized by anyone who knows what you really are; being disowned by your family. The Shadow Service is the only family I have, and being on a mission is the only time I feel useful. You say we crave being around death, Chelsea. I say, working a mission is the only time I feel alive."

"Well," she said, "if you keep training and reading the briefs it might keep you alive a little longer."

He was about to retort when they were interrupted. A young man in the navy blue uniform of the Royal Army stepped into the gymnasium.

"Excuse me, Shadow Seven," he said. "Control would like to see you straight away."

"I'll be there as soon as I clean up," he said.

"Yes, sir," the young man replied. He turned on his heel and left.

"Well," Chelsea said. "Sounds like maybe that mission you've been craving is here."

"He probably wants to lecture me on the communication protocols," Wolf said, but he couldn't hide his smile. Chelsea was almost certainly right.

"Well, if you're wrong," she returned, "make sure you remember what I taught you. Don't one-hand the big blows. You open up your inside line, and that's trouble."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. He rubbed his neck again. "How could I forget?"

"*Touché*," she replied with a smile. Wolf laughed.

“Someday, I’m going to make you make good on that promise.”

“You’d better improve your skill first.”

Wolf laughed again. He took a last look at Chelsea Chandler, wished he had time to continue flirting with her, and then gave up and headed for the locker room.

Twenty minutes later, he was standing in the office of Micah Bartleby, the head of Her Majesty’s Shadow Service. The chief was a large man with a disproportionately small head. Every part of him was round, and Wolf was constantly of the impression that his boss looked like a giant beetle, no matter how he dressed to disguise it.

Today, he wore black robes and sat behind an imposing oak desk in an immaculate office adorned by paintings of the vessels he commanded when he served in the Royal Navy. He barely looked up when Wolf entered the office.

“Come in, Shadow Seven,” he said in the gruff, no-nonsense voice he always used when he had business to discuss. Wolf’s hopes for a mission rose a little.

“What do you know about the situation in Alfar?” Bartleby asked.

“Mostly what I read in the briefs,” Wolf replied. “It’s an elf nation across the Gleaming Sea. Split from its neighbor, Jifan, thirteen years ago after a religious uprising caused a *coup*. The two nations warred for several years before coming to an uneasy truce.

“The principle disagreement is over who is the proper successor to the prophet, Frey. Jifan is ruled by the more conservative Shendali sect, while, until recently, Alfar was in the hands of progressive Freyalans.

“Four years ago, Shendali fundamentalists attempted to take over the Alfari government, and the rightful rulers asked for our assistance in holding the country. We’ve had boots on the ground ever since, and our soldiers have struggled to maintain order and prevent sectarian violence between Freyalans and Shendalis.

“Six months ago, Freyalan and Shendali leaders formed a coalition government in the name of peace. The president of the coalition is Freyalan, but numerous key officials are Shendali. Since then, ethnic cleansing and other elf-on-elf violence has waned, but Jifani-funded terrorists still attempt to destabilize the government with suicide killers.

“The coalition government wants us to withdraw our troops now, believing both that their security forces are capable of containing the violence and that anti-human sentiment among Shendali fundamentalists will be countered by our withdrawal, thereby reducing the number of incidents, both potential and real.”

“Very good,” Bartleby said. He looked at Wolf for the first time. “But there’s more. As you know, Alfar is critical to our interests in the cold war with Phrygia. Elves are master artisans of magic, and Alfar is our principle supplier of such goods. Jifan sells to the Phrygians. We therefore need to ensure the Alfari government stays in the hands of progressives and doesn’t fall to the anti-human fundamentalists ruling Jifan.”

“Which makes the negotiations to withdraw our soldiers from Alfar tricky,” Wolf commented.

“Precisely,” the chief said.

“Am I being reassigned to Alfar?” Wolf asked. The thought made him nervous. He was unfamiliar with that theater. For the past several years, he’d been operating exclusively north of the Gleaming Sea, particularly in Phrygia and the states that bordered it.

“Not yet,” Bartleby answered. “There’s something else we need to look into.”

“What’s that?” Wolf asked.

Bartleby motioned for Wolf to sit down. Wolf dropped into a comfortable chair in front of the chief’s desk, while the big man pulled a file from a drawer. He tossed it across the desk to Wolf, who picked it up.

“Shadow Five’s been murdered,” Bartleby said. Wolf looked up from the file sharply.

“They got Sara?”

“Mm-hmm,” Bartleby said, nodding.

“How?”

“We’re not sure yet,” the chief replied. “Her body was severely mutilated, torn to pieces. So was the horse she was riding. She was on her way to Al-Adan. Based on the tracks left by the horse, she was going at great speed. She appears to have been thrown forward. The evidence suggests she was being chased.”

“We’re sure it wasn’t a wild animal?”

“The bite marks don’t match those of any predator indigenous to the area. The details are in the file I gave you.”

Wolf nodded and glanced at the documents. He scanned the particulars. They were gruesome.

“So what do we think killed her?” he asked.

“Like I said, we’re still working on that. Quincy’s on location,” the chief said, referring to the head of Urland’s Magic Division. “He’s researching magical and Shadow angles.”

“Do we have any leads at all?” Wolf said. He and Sara Wensley-James had been friends. He wanted to bring her murderer to justice.

“One,” Bartleby answered. “That’s where you come in.” Wolf looked up from the file. His grey eyes met the chief’s gaze.

“As you are likely aware,” Bartleby continued, “one of Shadow Five’s abilities was to send messages to select individuals. She had to be well acquainted with the subject and could only choose one or two people at a time.

“Most recently, she connected herself to Kenderbrick, her controller. This enabled her to communicate with her field officers without actually having to report in. She was a great asset in this way.

“Before she died, she sent Kenderbrick a one-word message: ‘Silverleaf.’” Wolf cocked his head quizzically. “Sagaius Silverleaf is the Alfari ambassador to Urland.”

Wolf’s eyebrows raised. He ran his fingers through his thick, black hair. For a moment he didn’t know what to say. The accusation was unthinkable.

“The Alfari ambassador murdered Sara?” he said.

“No,” Bartleby replied. “That wouldn’t be possible.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” the chief said as though it should be obvious, “for the past three weeks, he’s been here in Urland.”

Wolf sat back in his chair and pondered the implications. Sara was killed by some mysterious power or beast. She fingered the Alfari ambassador before she died. Silverleaf couldn’t have done it by any conventional means, because he’d been here for more than a fortnight. Something about all this wasn’t right.

“What’s the connection then?” he asked.

“That,” the chief said, “is what I want you to find out.

“Silverleaf often spends his evenings at the Dubonney Club downtown. I want you to try to get close to him and see what you can learn.”

Wolf scratched the back of his head. He thought the chief’s plan was doubtful.

“Chief,” he said. “That club is for aristocracy only.”

“And if I’m not too much mistaken, you come from noble blood,” Bartleby snapped.

“My family disowned me when they discovered I was a Shadow,” Wolf protested. “I can’t make any claims to the title.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, man!” Bartleby sounded as though he might explode. “This is the bleeding Shadow Service. Do you think we can’t pull the appropriate strings to have your title temporarily reinstated?”

“One of my best agents is dead. Somehow the Alfari ambassador is involved. I want to know how, and I want to know why. The key may be at the Dubonney Club, and I intend to use whatever resources I have to find out. So quit crying about your beastly family and go investigate Silverleaf.”

Bartleby finished and held Wolf with his gaze. Wolf seethed quietly in the chair, his fair complexion turning a dark red. He didn’t care that Bartleby was his commanding officer; the man had no right to speak to him that way. What did he know about being disowned and reviled?

“You have a job to do, Wolf,” Bartleby said, softening his tone. “We all do. I appreciate that this is awkward for you, but national security may hinge on this investigation. I need you to focus on what’s important.”

Wolf chewed his bottom lip. He didn’t like it, but the chief was right. He had a job to do.

“Very well,” Wolf said. “I’ll make reservations for tonight.” He got up and went to the door.

“Oh, one more thing,” Bartleby said as Wolf was about to exit. “Shadow Five’s death means you’ve been promoted again. You’re Shadow Six now.”

“Yes, sir,” Wolf said after a pause.

He went out, feeling depressed. He’d been excited when he arrived. He’d gotten a mission at last. But this one left nothing but a sour taste in his mouth. He swore he was going to make whoever was responsible for Sara’s death pay. And if it was Sagaius Silverleaf, the Alfaris were just going to have to find themselves a new ambassador.

Chapter 3: Thirst for Blood (Eleven Months before Revelation Day)

General Yevgeni Tupelov could barely contain his disdain. How could these politicians and generals be so willing to turn their backs on Phrygia? Where was their patriotism, their sense of pride?

He hated dealing with bureaucrats. It was a waste of his time to be here in Mockba for the military brain trust's annual comprehensive state of security briefing. He should be out commanding his troops.

"If we do not reduce our military spending," General Petrovsky said, addressing the politburo, "we will not be able to fund other critical programs, including domestic projects such as increasing agricultural output."

Tupelov rubbed his bald head and glared with his singular eye. Petrovsky was the supreme commander of the Phrygian military. How could a man in his position ask for a reduction in military spending?

"What do you suggest," one of the men in the room asked. Tupelov couldn't remember his name. It didn't matter. All these politburo politicians were the same – bloated and self-absorbed. None of them appreciated true sacrifice. They lived in their cozy apartments in Mockba while the soldiers froze in the snow and ice, protecting Phrygia from her enemies.

"We must redirect twelve percent of military funds into the People's Defense Bureau," Petrovsky answered. "Another three percent should be added to the budget for the People's Paranormal Research Unit. These two agencies provide far greater defense of our nation than the military can."

Tupelov was shocked. Fifteen percent of the military budget was going to be redirected to the damned Shadows? Was he mad?

"How so?" a second politician said. Tupelov thought that one's name might be Mirin.

"The cold war with Urland does not present any immediate military danger," Petrovsky said. Tupelov couldn't believe his ears. "Urland is not in a position to attack Phrygia or her interests directly. The true threat comes from Urland's Shadow Service and her magical superiority. Urlish Shadows can penetrate our holdings – both military and political – and gather intelligence that can lead to devastating results. We must give greater funding to counterintelligence and intelligence-gathering efforts with our own Shadows in the PDB to effectively gain the upper hand in our struggle with the Urlanders.

"Furthermore, they have many more magicians in their employ and enjoy a better relationship with Alfar than do we with neighboring Jifan. Thus, they can purchase elfin magic in much greater quantity and at a much lower cost than we. Moreover, Urlish magicians receive training from elfin masters. We receive no such treatment from the Jifanis.

"Frankly, comrades, we have more soldiers than the Urlanders, but they can't help us win this critical struggle. We need to be allocating our resources toward more effective weapons – Shadows and magic."

“I’m sorry, Comrade General,” the nameless politician said. “You mentioned by cutting military spending, you could fund domestic projects. How does reallocating fifteen percent of your budget to the PDB and PPRU accomplish this?”

“I am suggesting a total budget reduction of eighteen percent,” Petrovsky answered.

“What!” Tupelov rose from his seat, unable to contain his anger any longer. Petrovsky glared at him.

“Fifteen percent of that money will be reallocated to intelligence efforts, and the remaining three percent will fund domestic projects,” Petrovsky finished.

“And just what will happen to the military personnel, who will be displaced by your eighteen-percent budget cut?” Tupelov demanded.

All eyes in the room turned to Petrovsky. He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“As many as can will be reassigned to the PDB,” he said.

“And the rest?” Tupelov said.

“We need to improve our agricultural output,” Petrovsky said. “They would be given farms, so they can continue to serve the state.”

“Farms?” Tupelov said, unable to believe what Petrovsky was suggesting. “Heroes of the people will be given farms? The defenders of Phrygia, who have sacrificed so much in her name, will be told to take up farming? This is intolerable!”

Tupelov felt his voice rising to a shout and was powerless to stop it. These bureaucratic idiots needed to understand what was being suggested.

“I always knew you had no stomach for war, General Petrovsky,” Tupelov continued, “but I had no idea you had so little respect for the soldiers under your command. This is absolutely outrageous.”

Petrovsky opened his mouth to retort, but he was interrupted by Mirin.

“Do you have an alternative proposal, General Tupelov?” he said.

Tupelov beamed. This was the moment he’d been waiting for.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” he replied. Petrovsky rolled his eyes and sat down.

“Members of the politburo, we have two problems facing us, both of which can be solved. First, we do not have as many resources as our Urlish enemies, and, second, Urland has us blockaded from improving that situation. I propose a military solution.

“General Petrovsky wants three percent of the military budget for magic, presumably so we can buy more from Jifan. But the Jifani government has a decidedly anti-human perspective, so continuing to buy from them at their inflated prices is poor policy.

“Neighboring Alfar, on the other hand, is more reasonable, as General Petrovsky himself pointed out. There are those within the Alfari government that desperately want the Urlanders out. We can assist them with this effort. We offer them Shadow support to effect a *coup* and provide military assistance to defeat the Urlanders.

“In Pushkingrad, under my direct command, are three legions of infantry and one of cavalry. Another two cavalry legions are stationed only a day’s ride away. Thus, we can bring

six legions, half of them mounted, to bear on Alfar with a six-day march across Jifan. We can secure Jifani cooperation by leading them to believe we are supporting a *coup* by Shendali fundamentalists, which will in part be true.”

“This is madness!” Petrovsky shouted, standing again. “This plan has already been ruled out due to its aggressive and risky nature. What you are proposing is an act of war, and the Urlanders will respond appropriately.”

“No!” Tupelov yelled back. “Because we will be ready for them. We will set up a naval blockade off the Alfari coast, and send half of our *armada* to Celia to attack the Urlish fleet stationed there.

“Simultaneously, our units in East Bretelstein will surge across the border, driving the Urlanders all the way back to Gallica. The Urlanders will be on the defensive before they realize what has happened. With Alfar and Bretelstein firmly in our grip, we will then offer the Urlanders an armistice, which they will have no choice but to take. They will be cut off from the supply of magic, and we have a larger army.

“We will then be able to acquire magic from Alfar at a greatly reduced cost and receive the magical training Urland now enjoys. Plus, we will have the fertile farmland of West Bretelstein to harvest food for our own people. Our resources will increase substantially, and Urland will be weakened, unable to threaten us in any meaningful way.”

“And suppose,” Petrovsky said, his voice full of sarcasm, “Gallica doesn’t care for us occupying Bretelstein? Suppose they unite with the Urlanders, with whom they are already allied, to counterstrike into this fertile farmland you’re hoping to exploit?”

“Then we will crush them too!” Tupelov shouted. “If they will not live peaceably next to us, then we will take their land too.”

“And how many Phrygians will die in this glorious conquest of yours?” Petrovsky shot back. “How many families must lose loved ones to sate your thirst for blood? Because that is all this is. You are the one who cannot live peaceably with your neighbors, Yevgeni. You are driven by paranoia and rage, and if you do not desist with this mad plan to ignite a worldwide war, I shall have to consider stripping you of your rank and expelling you from the army.”

Tupelov’s whole head turned purple. The very thought of a milquetoast like Petrovsky expelling him from the military after twenty-seven years of service was beyond infuriating.

“Make such a threat again, Comrade,” he said, his voice a low growl, “and I will see your head on a spike.”

“Enough!” came a new voice.

Both soldiers turned their heads in its direction. It was Premier Mishkin. He had risen from his seat.

“I will not have this sort of juvenile squabbling between my generals, especially before the politburo,” Mishkin said. “General Tupelov, your proposal is intriguing but impractical. General Petrovsky, while your proposed budget change is sound, we cannot force our soldiers into farming. They are our most gallant citizens and deserve our respect. Any soldiers that would

choose to farm we shall allow, but you must come up with another plan to accommodate the soldiers displaced by your budget reallocations. Do the rest of you agree?"

Tupelov scanned the rest of the military officials. They all nodded their assent, although some of them didn't look happy.

"Very well," Mishkin said. "Let us move on to the next item on the agenda.

Tupelov seated himself. His lone eye bored a hole into Petrovsky. He would see that man pay for his insolence, and he would make certain Phrygia didn't suffer due to the fool's disastrous spending cuts.

The story continues in **STATE OF GRACE!**

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John R. Phythyon, Jr. wishes he'd been bitten by a radioactive spider, so he could have lots of exciting adventures. In the absence of such a miracle, he contents himself with writing about such people. He is an author, playwright, and award-winning game designer. His commentary has been heard on Kansas Public Radio. His play, *Isabelle*, has been commercially produced; and he earned Origins Awards for his work on *Celtic Age: Role-playing the Myths, Magic, and Monsters of the Celts* from *Avalanche Press*, *Gamemastering Secrets* from *Grey Ghost Press*, and *Sailor Moon Collectible Card Game* from *Dart Flipcards*. *State of Grace* is his first novel.

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