

CHAD CORRIE



AS THE  
SPARROW  
FLIES

SOJOURNERS' SAGA BOOK I



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DARK HORSE BOOKS

## CHAPTER ONE

*Crows and Ash. Submit or Be Slain.*

If not for the crows, the fields would have been silent. They circled above in the reddening sky, swooping down now and then whenever a suitable opening presented itself. The freshly slain bodies gathered into heaps across the field were a tempting sight. A handful would land on a mound and start exploring a body until another would arrive and send the first group back into the air. The process ensured none would claim much of anything from the dead, leaving them whole for when they were put to the torch. Elliott had seen it many times since becoming Sir Pillum's squire three years ago.

The neat mounds were outside the town, between it and their camp. The common brown tents used by the infantry formed the outer part of the encampment, with the knights' white pavilions at its core. The camp was assembled a short distance from the town's walls but not far enough to jeopardize their hold over it. Not that they had any worries of losing control. The battle was over, and, like everyone else they'd encountered, the townsfolk couldn't stand before them.

Elliott sat on his simple folding chair, polishing his master's shield. The infantry's tents were shorter than the knights', which, along with the wide paths between key junctions, allowed him a decent view beyond the camp's confines.

If not for the mounds of dead, it would have actually been a fairly pleasing sight. But such things were a distraction from his work, and he pulled himself from them. Sir Pillum's shield had seen some heavy strikes today, but Elliott would have it looking presentable for Selection. After three years of practice he could hammer out small dings or buff out small scrapes with ease. It was the polishing that took most of his effort. Yet no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep his mind on his work.

Soon enough he was studying the crows. They wouldn't touch the bodies of the infantry or the Salamandrine, only the enemy. The fallen soldiers of Pyre deserved more dignity and had been tucked away under tents reserved for such purposes, where they'd be free from any further defilement. Those who had secured the bodies—fellow soldiers and those squires who saw to their fallen masters—had finished their tasks about an hour ago, giving them plenty of time to join the rest for Selection. It was a squire's honor to witness it on behalf of their fallen master.

Elliott doubted Sir Pillum would fall in battle before Elliott became a knight. His master was a mighty man of valor who seemed unstoppable on the field and was just as zealous regarding the things of Pyre. Few could find a better knight to serve, and Elliott knew he was quite fortunate in having been assigned as his squire. And he'd served well, ever hopeful of being found worthy of elevation into the Salamandrine's ranks. He'd technically be eligible by year's end, when he'd finally turn sixteen. But there was no guarantee of acceptance just because you reached a certain age. He had to be found worthy.

Looking back now, Elliott was amazed at how fast the last three years had passed. Though he couldn't see how it was possible, Sir Pillum had told him the time of his service would go faster than he first thought. And though during the years it seemed that things were actually slowing down rather than speeding up, he now stood on the cusp of some great days to come. But until then he had to keep to his tasks, do his duty to Pyre and his master—all of which would reveal and remove any impurities that might still cling to any hidden parts of him so he could be found pure and worthy enough to earn the title and place of a knight.

It was the highest honor anyone could hope to achieve outside the priesthood. And while he was devout, Elliott knew he wasn't cut out for the greater responsibilities and honors given priests. The proving of the Salamandrine was challenging enough; the priesthood was on another level. Not to mention priests had to answer to Pyre and Salbrin directly. He knew his own shortcomings and never deemed himself able to presume such a place. Becoming a knight was honor enough.

Few could stand against the Salamandrine's might. They were the greatest warriors to walk Annulis and held something no others possessed: the favor of an unstoppable deity. Pyre was the mightiest of gods and had shown this truth time and again as Salbrin and his generals had led them to victory after victory. Those who dared war against them instead of embracing Pyre's truth quickly learned their lesson. Just as those who had stood before them today had . . .

Shoving his daydreaming aside once again, Elliott focused anew on his task. He worked the cloth and special balm over the red bird emblazoned on the shield's white surface. The bird rested in the center of the shield, wings spread and head cocked to the left. It resembled something crafted of living flame, making it a fitting emblem of their god and their most sacred mission.

But this wasn't the only thing that marked a knight's shield as unique. All of them were shaped like tilted squares with the points of their corners facing up, down, left, and right. These points were capped with sharp steel and used as weapons in battle. Sir Pillum was particularly fond of this tactic, as Elliott could attest after scraping dried blood from the points more times than he could count. He'd even had to sharpen them a few times over the years after such continuous enthusiastic use.

Though this was nothing when compared to what the clothing suffered along the way. Travel alone could soil any garment, but with the fighting and everything else, a dedicated group of camp workers was necessary to continuously mend and wash garments on what Elliott could only assume was an hourly basis, given the size of their force.

No, he was content enough working on making *one* knight's gear presentable, not dealing with knights, infantrymen, priests, and everyone

else alongside. And it was a truth he'd often remind himself of whenever he found himself thinking he might be getting overwhelmed in his chores. What he had been given to oversee was nothing in comparison to that grueling work. But all had their part in the grand campaign, and all served Pyre as best they were able.

After a short burst of work, Elliott gave his arm a rest, fastening his gaze on another circling crow. It appeared as if the bird swam in a sea of blood. The reddish tint wasn't as red as it was said to have been in years past—during the Days of Blood—but it still lingered. Before the Year of Night it was said the skies were a deep blue filled with white clouds. All Elliott's generation knew was a reddish hue that darkened at sunset. The clouds had lightened over the years but still held crimson lines and shadows.

He doubted he'd ever see the sky as it had been in Salbrin's youth. Of course, these were all minor matters, since everything would be destroyed by the coming flames. The purified world to come would be perfect, and Elliott would get to enjoy it with all the others found worthy. It was a fitting reward for which he was eager to serve.

"Looking for omens, are we?" Sir Pillum's voice woke Elliott from his reverie.

"No, sir." Elliott leapt to his feet, keeping the shield in hand as he did so. "Just resting my arm."

Sir Pillum glanced down at the shield. "Well done, Elliott. You already cleaned up the armor, and the shield looks more than presentable for Selection."

"Thank you, sir." He took a quick glance across the half-plate suit Sir Pillum wore, making sure there wasn't a stain or spot anywhere. He didn't see anything. He knew the sword strapped to Sir Pillum's side was in good condition and extra sharp so took careful stock of the open-faced helmet resting under his master's arm instead.

The nose guard had given Elliott's fingers a good battle; it was often crusted with blood that refused to leave no matter how hard he scrubbed. It was almost as bad as the scale mail section attached to the helmet's back lip, protecting Sir Pillum's neck from attack. He didn't see anything out of place.

“I think you’ve earned a bit of a break.” Sir Pillum nodded toward the various rags and containers holding the polishing balm and other cleaning oils and supplies beside Elliott. “Get that put away and you can accompany me into the town.”

“Yes, sir.” Elliott did his best to keep from showing too much of his excitement as he hurriedly picked up the materials and put them into Sir Pillum’s tent. He hadn’t been able to attend too many Selections thus far and was particularly interested in this one. “They do you a great honor, in letting you present the choice.”

“Yes, they do.” It was clear Sir Pillum was pleased with his part in the process. It was a way for those who served Pyre with honor to be honored in turn. Elliott could think of none more deserving. “I’m most thankful for Commander Calix and Milec allowing me the privilege.”

“Do you think many will step forth?” Elliott came running back out of the tent, straightening his own attire as he did. Selection was an important event. He needed to make sure he represented Sir Pillum and Pyre well. Though he wore only a simple tunic and pants, he made sure they were kept clean and in good repair.

Sir Pillum nodded his approval of Elliott’s appearance. His master had never found fault with it before, but there could always be a first time—and especially today, when more eyes would be upon him than usual.

“These Laromi are weak,” said Sir Pillum, taking his shield and affixing it to his left forearm. “I doubt there will be many found worthy, but we still need to honor Pyre by giving them a choice.”

He ran a hand through his black hair before donning his helmet. Like all the Salamandrine, Sir Pillum kept it cut short and his face clean shaven. “Let’s go. I don’t want to dishonor the commander with any tardiness,” he said, spinning on his heel and making for the town’s partially demolished walls.

Elliott was fast at his heels.

“If things go like they have been,” Sir Pillum continued, “we might even have time for some more lessons this evening.”

“I’ve been practicing in my free time.”

“It shows.” Sir Pillum peered over his shoulder with a hint of a smile in his brilliant gray eyes. “Keep it up and you’ll make all of us proud.”



“Yes, sir,” Elliott cheerfully replied.

For the remainder of their walk, he couldn’t help but envision himself fighting alongside his master and the rest of the Salamandrine. Soon enough such daydreams could very well become a reality.



It was the custom that survivors from any conflict were presented inside the main courtyard of what remained of their town or village. Here, parts of the walls had been breached in sections and the smoke from the fires still lingered. There was no need to extinguish the flames. They’d have plenty of company soon enough.

The courtyard was ideal for holding large groups of people and easy to defend and secure should anyone try something foolish. Few did, but there were always some you had to watch. While not all would embrace Pyre’s mercy, some would actively oppose it. Those had to be made examples of lest Pyre’s great name become tarnished through leniency.

Most of the squires and the bulk of the infantry were kept back to mind the camp while the priests and the Salamandrine were given the privilege and responsibility of Selection. Neither took it lightly. Elliott was included today as a form of honor for Sir Pillum, and he was eager to witness his master’s part in the rite. He found himself wishing they could just rush through the preamble and get into the meat of things but checked his rising lack of discipline. There was a process, and he would keep to it. Salbrin had been given it from Pyre himself. It should and would be honored. If Elliott couldn’t do that, then he wasn’t fit for the ranks of the Salamandrine . . . or service to Pyre in general. Willing himself calm, he occupied his mind by studying the Laromi.

Like all on Annulis, the Laromi possessed olive skin and a mixture of hair and eye colors.

Those gathered were mostly women and children, with a much reduced number of men. All stood silently before the priests, doing their best to look brave. Elliott had seen it before and heard of it more times than that. The arrogant ones who refused to embrace Pyre’s mercy were

all alike, seeking comfort in their own stubbornness rather than humbly embracing the truth.

The difference, besides their choice of gods, was in their clothing. Elliott had never seen anyone else on Annulis share the same appearance. Laromic men dressed exactly alike: brown or black pants with off-white or white shirts, plain belts, and boots. They all were clean shaven and short haired. The women wore similar attire, with brown or black skirts and off-white or white blouses. Their hair was longer than the men's, but even so they wore it in similar styles. Why anyone would want to look just like another was beyond him. But so were most of the ways of those outside Pyre's mercy.

The infantry closed off the back and sides of the square, with the Salamandrine in front, blocking the main gate. Each soldier wore leather brigandine armor. All of it had been polished, along with their swords, maces, and daggers. The archers among them made sure their bows were strung over their shoulders opposite their full quivers of red- and yellow-fletched arrows. All wore open-faced helms and carried round wooden shields marked with the crest of the great city of Pyrus and its god.

A line of standards spread out among the frontline of knights keeping a respectful distance behind the priests. The white banners flapped in the early evening breeze, making the flaming bird they displayed appear to be fluttering in flight. Above these banners, on top of each wooden pole from which the white cloth was draped, perched a bronze bird. Seemingly composed of living flame, its spread wings caught the light and shimmered with a radiant glow.

"Submit or be slain," Milec, the head priest of Pyre, informed the Laromi gathered before him. "These are the words of Pyre and Salbrin, his herald." He, like the rest of the priests, was dressed in white robes. Over these he wore a scale mail shirt. On top of this was a red tabard with the same blazing bird found on all the Pyric shields. Unlike on the shields, though, the crest sewn over the priest's chest was made of golden thread.

"Praise be to Pyre," Milec continued, holding his blaze rod firmly in hand. The device was carried by all priests of Pyre. The slender metal staff was a wonder of the age and another clear sign of Pyre's supremacy over all the other so-called gods. It was made of polished steel and contrasted

with the golden circlet on each priest's head, crowning them as servants of the great god of Pyrus.

"Praise be to Pyre and his herald, Salbrin," Elliott joined the army in shouting with one voice. A certain sense of pride rose within him. How could it not, when you knew you were one of the chosen who'd see the world to come. He allowed himself a fleeting glance at the toppled statue of the Laromi's supposed goddess.

Laroma's remains were scattered around the pedestal on which she had stood. With a prominent place in the center of the courtyard, she had welcomed and reminded all of their corruption from the truth. The statue had been sculpted from solid stone and painted in an attempt to resemble a living woman. It was foolishness, of course, for no stone statue could ever be a god. But it was a common thing among the people outside Pyrus.

She had worn a black dress and crow feathers, but the rest was lost in her now-fragmented form. The sound of some nearby movement turned Elliott's attention to his left. Sir Pillum was carefully shifting his weight between his feet. Elliott grinned at the notion of his master being nervous but could understand his concern.

"The time has come to select your fate," Milec bellowed at the Laromi. His naturally deep voice made his words even more impressive, as was evident from the reactions Elliott saw flash across some of the Laromi's faces. "You have no other choice."

"Sir Pillum, please approach." Milec turned and motioned for him to step forward.

Elliott's chest swelled with pride as Sir Pillum squared his shoulders and strode through the space between the Salamandrine and the priests. When he arrived at Milec's side, he took a small breath, then addressed the Laromi with a strong, loud voice.

"There is coming a judgment to this world—a great fire that will burn across all Annulis. But Pyre in his mercy has allowed an escape.

"There is only Pyre," said Sir Pillum. "Great is he and single in power!"

"Great is Pyre!" Elliott joined in with the rest of the army's shout.

"You have before you a choice." Sir Pillum pointed out the scattered stony bits of their fallen goddess. "You see the fate of your false god. She,

like the rest, cannot save you. But it is not so with Pyre.” He turned around and grabbed one of the standards a nearby knight was holding. In one smooth motion he spun back around, lifting it overhead. It was a clever and dramatic flourish of which Milec and the other priests heartily approved. “There is only Pyre and his people!”

“There is only Pyre and his people!” The great shout arose from Elliott and the rest of the Pyri, who repeated it about half a dozen times. Each time it was chanted, the unease among the Laromi increased. Some even started inching backward, as if they could actually flee from the truth confronting them. When the shouting subsided, Sir Pillum lowered the banner, but not his voice.

“Those who wish to be purged from this world’s corruption and look forward to the Great Conflagration with joy instead of fear, step forward. Pyre is not one to deny you a choice. He desires loyal followers ready to carry out his commands. You are free to choose whom you will. Today you can step forward and submit to Pyre, the true god, or you can remain as you are and in the end face the cleansing to follow.”

Now Milec faced the Laromi, lifting his blaze rod overhead. “Those who submit to Pyre, step forward.”

The air was thick with tension. The silence was near deafening. Even the crackling of the scattered fires couldn’t break its hold over the area. None of the inhabitants dared look at each other. Each kept their eyes anchored on the ground, mothers guiding children’s faces into their skirts. This continued for what seemed like hours, until finally two older men sheepishly stepped forward.

“Only two?” Elliott whispered. It was the lowest number he’d ever seen. Didn’t they know what Pyre was looking to save them from? How he would reward those who submitted to his mercy?

“Will no more heed Pyre’s call?” Milec calmly asked, but it was clear he shared Elliott’s sense of disappointment. When no one else ventured forward, his face became like stone. “Then so be it. Selection has ended. Your fate has been sealed.”

A tongue of yellow flame leapt to life atop Milec’s blaze rod. The rest of the priests followed in igniting theirs. The whooshing sound of the flames coming to life nearly in unison still sent a shiver up Elliott’s spine.

“Come forward and kneel,” Milec commanded the two Laromi who’d been selected. They did so with cautious steps, keeping their heads down and eyes far from meeting anyone’s gaze. “You will not be appointed unto Pyre’s displeasure but in the Great Conflagration will enter into his favor. But these,” he said, directing his blaze rod at the others behind the two supplicants, “will share the fate of all who refuse submission to the great Pyre. Let the purging begin!”

Sir Pillum stepped forward, drawing his sword. This action was repeated by all the army save the squires. They were to refrain from such an honor until brought into the ranks of the Salamandrine. The infantry would keep the perimeter, making sure none could escape. With keen precision, the knights slaughtered those who hadn’t stepped forward. Some Laromi tried to run in the panic that followed, but those who managed to flee the knights’ blades found the infantry’s blades ready to catch them.

There was no escape.

Elliott watched as the shield he’d so painstakingly cleaned was quickly splattered with blood yet again. Sir Pillum, like all of the Salamandrine, was ruthless. There was no room for mercy now that Selection had been made. These Laromi had chosen their fate and were sealed in it. Pyre had shown his mercy. They had rejected it, and now bore the brunt of that rejection.

As one who had seen such a thing before, the sights and sounds didn’t trouble Elliott in the least. In the beginning there had been a small twinge, but over time it faded. It helped to remind himself of how Salbrin compared the matter to weeding a garden. The undesirable weeds were removed so the ground was made suitable for the righteous plants to grow.

All during the purging the two supplicants knelt and sobbed. Their actions weren’t lost on Milec. Seeing such a display soured his features into a disapproving scowl. “Take them to the camp,” he instructed a nearby soldier. “Once they have been properly introduced to Pyre, we’ll see where they might be placed.”

The soldier yanked the two up by their arms and led them outside the town. Once the two had been removed, Milec lifted his hand and blaze rod as Elliott, the other squires, and the priests lowered their heads in reverence. “Oh Pyre, we offer you this sacrifice. May it hasten your day.”

“Praise be to Pyre the Purifier,” said Milec with his deep, powerful voice.

“Praise be to Pyre.” All gathered spoke in unison.

“Now, my brothers, let this filth be cleansed.” All the priests raised their blaze rods as the knights departed the square that had taken on all the trappings of a fresh battlefield. As one, the priests directed their blaze rods at the slain Laromi, shooting out a line of fire onto their bodies. In short order a fire was kindled among them, and thick, oily smoke began darkening the heavens.

“Praised be Pyre,” said Milec.

“Praised be Pyre!” went up the refrain as Selection came to a close.

Everyone quickly went about their appointed tasks, working in tight uniformity, allowing no waste of time as fire pots were brought in and what remained of the town was set alight. The stone walls were even set ablaze with a powerful concoction able to bring forth such intense flames that even stone was consumed.

Before night had fallen, the town had been transformed into a pile of charcoal. The mounds of the fallen Laromi outside the walls would follow. Each would be set ablaze and left to burn throughout the night. When the fires cooled the next day, only ashes would remain. The land would then be cleansed, and Pyre would be glorified.