



AS
THE PATHS
CONVERGE

SOJOURNERS' SAGA BOOK II

BY CHAD CORRIE



DARK HORSE BOOKS

CHAPTER ONE

A Grim Morning. A Lone Encounter.

Elliott's eyes opened on a fresh dawn. The last he recalled were the falling rocks and the clash of arms punctuating the terrible screams and roars dominating the night. The new silence was at once a welcome and frightening thing.

He was still in his armor but lying on his side. Vaguely he recalled some force knocking him from his horse. He rolled to his back, studying the sky. It still retained its familiar red hue, but was clear of any clouds . . . and any more falling rocks.

Huffing, he sat up.

The brigandine leather shirt didn't hinder his movements, and he didn't feel any pain outside some stiffness in his lower back. He attributed the soreness to how he slept. Though *sleep* probably wasn't the best word for it. He'd been knocked completely unconscious.

A quick inspection followed. There were no cuts or bruises. Nothing. It was a small miracle in and of itself. The same couldn't have been said for everything else around him.

From what he could see there were plenty of Laromi scattered around Larom's walls like dead ants around an anthill. None had made it out of the city alive. Some had been crushed by the falling rocks. Others appeared to have been trampled to death. And there were some who had

clear signs of having suffered wounds before or maybe even during their escape—these proving too grievous to overcome. There were some other Pyri, of course, among the fallen. They had all been making a mad dash for whatever gate—makeshift or proper—presented itself in the end, Elliott among them.

The walls too had suffered. He could see some cracks running like veins across and between the worked stone. In some places pieces stuck out as if punched from the other side. In other places they had toppled or clung together precariously. Even so the majority of the walls still stood, giving the impression, however fleeting, that the whole of the city remained a force to contend with. It was far from the truth but might fool someone observing from a distance.

Taking to his feet, he searched for his horse. There wasn't any sign of it. That wasn't good. Without his horse, getting word back to Pyrus was going to be severely hampered. Time wasn't on his side as it was, but adding in another delay would make things even worse.

A new breeze fluttered through his hair, bringing with it the smell of the dead and burning bodies and the rest of the smoldering rubble from inside the city. Most of the fires had burned out, but there were still some small twisting spires of smoke rising from deeper inside Larom's interior.

From where he stood he had a clear view back through the raw opening that had broken through the city's thick wall last night. The dead still crowded around it as they had in life, but he could see a good ways inside. There were many more bodies and plenty of debris, but nothing he saw gave him any hope anyone yet lived. Still, he was going to have to look around.

Maybe there was a horse he could find. Maybe the supplies in the camp still remained. He'd need some food and water to get started. A tent would be nice too if he was really going to be on his own for a while. But more importantly, he wanted to do right by his master. If he was going to be delayed on his trek, he should at least make sure he knew what had befallen Sir Pillum. And the last Elliott saw him, he was just inside a freshly formed breach amid a thrashing throng of people.

Elliott recalled those final moments vividly. The screams and shouts of the dying and warring were all around. The panic was palpable as everyone was seeking escape from the death raining from above. And there his master made his final stand—Sir Pillum, the paragon of knightly virtue and service to Pyre. He'd willingly charged into the fray, sacrificing his own life so that Elliott should keep his and send word back to Pyre. He would be honored as best Elliott knew how.

Elliott searched the ground where he'd been lying. A few feet beyond he found his sword; his helmet had rolled some yards beyond it. He couldn't find his shield. The sword was the most important thing right now, as it was both tool and defense should any surprises still linger behind the walls.

He retrieved the weapon, sighed, and then started moving for the opening in the wall. He made sure to walk at a good rate but still in a way that helped keep his footsteps silent to any curious ears. He poked a few Laromic bodies with his sword as he passed.

Nothing.

He left the bodies of the Pyric infantry alone. In a better time these would have been collected and piled into a mound for burning. Elliott didn't see himself doing that even if he wanted to. If all the army was dead, there wasn't enough wood to build the mounds, let alone man all those fires. Knowing he wasn't going to be able to honor the funerary rite made the weight on his shoulders even heavier.

No matter where he looked, he saw failure. Part of the great army of Pyrus, even the Salamandrine itself, was no more. He'd yet to see the camp, but just from the chaos and ruin he viewed from the lip of the wall's opening, he knew there was no reason for optimism. The charred, crushed dead were stark evidence of the truth. While there was some small pleasure in seeing the Laromi hadn't made it either, it wasn't enough to lessen the ever-growing load weighing him down with every step.

He cleared the hole's lip, trying not to dwell on how bad the stench had grown. It wasn't just dead bodies but burnt stone and wood and just about anything else capable of catching flame. He was used to some of the smell from the way things were after they'd set a town or village ablaze.

But this time something was different. Maybe it was in his mind. No matter. He had a duty to undertake and wasn't going to be sidetracked by anything else.

If he hadn't seen the layout of the courtyard previously, he might have been lost amid the mess strewn across its broken cobblestones. A vicious series of jagged cracks and lines made a web-like design leading back to where Elliott assumed the crater was from that last cluster of large rocks that had fallen before he lost consciousness.

Bodies, debris, and even some dead horses littered the landscape. Thankfully, the statue of the Laromi's goddess had been toppled in the tumult. It had crushed a handful beneath it and appeared to have been pummeled even further by some additional falling rocks, which marred the painted façade of the being the stone was supposed to represent. It was a small victory but a greater truth. Pyre was still above all the false gods, and all would fall before him.

Elliott stopped when he spotted Sir Pillum's body. Thankfully, he'd been spared any horrible disfigurements from the flames or falling rocks. It looked as if his master had been knocked from his horse by the same blast that had taken Elliott. Unlike Elliott's horse, though, Sir Pillum's wasn't able to escape. The beast lay on its side a few feet away. Had Elliott not gone when Sir Pillum had urged him, he might have shared the same end. Instead, he survived, and with him the hope that Salbrin and the Quorum would know of the Pyri's successes and fate.

Elliott found his master's sword nearby and set it over Sir Pillum's armored chest with the blade pointing to his feet. He brought Sir Pillum's hands over the pommel. The result was an appearance of repose that for the moment helped him forget his loss. He was surprised by his lack of emotion throughout the process. Here his master—the man who had taught and inspired him so much over these last three years—lay dead, and he didn't feel anything. He didn't cry. Didn't feel any sorrow. Nothing. What was wrong with him?

He felt out of sorts, out of place. Maybe *out of time* was a better way to put it. He just felt like the rest of the world had stopped, and yet he still needed to move on. He had his mission and he wasn't

about to fail—not at the cost of so many of his fellow warriors. Time would go on, and he with it. They would do their part and prepare the way for Pyre. This was just a temporary setback. It didn't change the plan or purpose. And he needed to get to it. He had a mission. His focus should be there. Anything else . . . Anything else was a needless distraction.

He saw a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye. Shifting his gaze, he caught sight of a lone girl making her way through the courtyard. He was sure she was a Sojourner. Elliott hadn't encountered any during their campaign but was educated in how they appeared, along with their beliefs and ways. And while they weren't like most folk across Annulis, they weren't any better, since they too denied Pyre's mercy.

She hadn't seen him yet, or if she had, didn't show any sign of concern. He watched her slow near a cluster of bodies before collapsing to her knees. He thought he heard her say something, but it was too low for him to make out.

She started sobbing, lifting up one of the dead in particular: a middle-aged male Sojourner. He watched her for some time, letting her cry. It gave him time to form a plan.

She wasn't armed and really wasn't an immediate threat. In truth, most Sojourners weren't much of any threat militarily. They were landless wanderers, vagabonds going from place to place looking for whatever their kind sought.

He supposed he could just leave her to her people and to her mourning. The longer he stayed watching, the more he was retained from his mission. But if she wasn't the only one alive, he needed to know. And it might be wise to see what else she could tell him. If she had any additional information from her travels, it might help his report and better prepare the army before they came through this area.

Inching forward, he carefully made his way through the bodies and wreckage, not wanting to attract any attention. This could all be a trap too, he reminded himself. Maybe some surviving Laromi had put her up to this in order to capture and kill the last of the Pyri. He needed to be ready for anything.

His left foot struck a stray stone, alerting her to his presence. Like a startled rabbit, she bolted upright, tear-streaked face locked upon him.

Elliott was surprised by her features. Like all on Annulis, she was olive skinned, but her soft brown eyes wouldn't let him go. Her light blond hair helped emphasize them all the more. Most of her hair had been pulled back into a ponytail and bound with some leather straps at the end. Only a few strands strayed across her forehead.

Now up close, Elliott could see she was probably the same age he was. Her brown dress had seen some travel. The black cuffs, collar, and skirt hem showed some dirt, but overall she appeared rather clean. He was impressed. It was better than what he was expecting and differed from the image he'd always held about how Sojourners looked, given their constant wandering.

"You alone?" He watched her carefully.

"Yes," she said just above a whisper.

"You're sure?" He wanted to give her one more opportunity in case some Laromi really were lingering nearby.

"You are the first person I have seen alive so far."

"And how did you survive?"

"I-I do not know."

Elliott paused, scanning the areas to his right and left. Both seemed clear of any threat.

"Who are you?" Her question returned his focus. She was studying his sword with more than a little apprehension.

"I'm a Pyri," he said.

"And you come from a city?"

"Yes."

"What is it called?"

"Pyrus."

"I have never heard of it before. Is it far?"

"Farther than you think."

She paused. "So are you all alone now too?"

Elliott found himself unable to concentrate. Those troublesome eyes had ensnared his thoughts. They held an innocence he found

almost unbelievable. While he'd seen many people during this campaign and knew others in Pyrus, there was something very different about this Sojourner . . .

He regained his composure. "It looks like I'm the only one to survive, but I haven't checked the camp yet."

Seeing she wasn't anything of a threat, Elliott decided he'd move on.

"Where are you going?"

"I still have to look over the rest of the city," he told her, but didn't know why.

"Why?"

He turned back at the question, noting she'd risen to her feet.

"What's it to you? Aren't you supposed to be out *sojourning* or something?" The question struck her hard, lowering her head and shoulders.

Surprisingly, Elliott felt a twinge of remorse.

"I am all that remains of my congregation," she replied, gaze still resting on her feet. "I am sorry for your loss."

"There's nothing to be sorry about," said Elliott. "They served Pyre well and now will enjoy their reward."

"Pyre?" Her head lifted. "Is that your goddess?"

Elliott felt his back straighten as he spoke. "Pyre isn't like one of those false gods. He's real and is willing to share his mercy with any who'd receive it."

"What sort of mercy?"

"Saving them from the end of Annulis." Elliott watched her brown eyes widen.

"Do you seek a city too?"

"What?"

"Do you seek a city to be free from the times to come?"

"No. We bring Pyre's mercy to others. If they accept it, they are welcome under the folds of Pyre's wings."

"And if they do not?"

"Why am I even telling you this?" he huffed. "The more time I waste with you, the less I have to search the city." He shook his head and continued walking deeper into the courtyard.

“What are you searching for?” she called after him.

“Provisions. If I don’t find a horse I’m going to be in for a much longer journey than I was expecting.”

“Do you mind if I search as well?” He stopped again. “I will need some provisions too.”

He still wasn’t even sure why he was talking with her. She was an infidel. She should be brought to Selection and—only he wasn’t able to do Selection, was he? That was the domain of the priests and a chosen knight. He was neither. He might have been able to recite the offer and even walk his way through the process, but it wouldn’t be right, and he wasn’t sure if Pyre would accept it or if he might cross any lines and risk Pyre’s wrath instead. And then he remembered he wanted to ask her a few more questions.

“Are you really a Sojourner?” he asked, facing her.

“Yes, I am.”

“Then where did you come from?”

“My congregation came from the West, from beyond the Calo River. Or at least that was what I can remember. The patriarch would have known more or perhaps my—”

She stopped suddenly, biting her lip as fresh tears welled in the corner of her eyes.

Elliott paid such things only faint attention, his mind busily working through the rough geography he knew from his own travels. The region was to the south, close to the opposite end of the continent from Pyrus at the north. It had also been previously cleared by Pyri. The Sojourners she had traveled with must have been missed or snuck out of the area before the Pyri could find them. If so, then it was a fitting end they met their fate here.

“Why did you come here?” Elliott continued.

“It was where our path led.”

“What path? I thought you Sojourners just wander aimlessly.”

“We follow the path, as the sparrow flies,” she said with as much conviction as anyone he’d known.

“And what does that even mean?”

“That we trust ourselves to the Sovereign, who will show us the way if we but keep seeking for it.”

“Way to what, though? If you’re going someplace, why wander anywhere? Why not just head right for it?”

She paused. “Because we do not know all of the path yet.”

“Whatever.” Elliott shook his head at such folly. Truly they were as lost as anyone else outside Pyre’s mercy. “Did you see anyone else on your journey east?”

She shook her head. “None but these Laromi.”

Elliott was surprised. “Not even more people like me?”

“No. There was nothing.” He didn’t like the sound of that. He’d been hoping to meet up with messengers and maybe even some of the bands of reinforcements Pyrus occasionally sent into the field. In the very least there were the relay stations from which troops and workers conveyed information, supplies, and new troops. If what this Sojourner was saying was true, there would be nothing for him in the southern part of the route. So he had to find a new way to make those connections. That could slow things down considerably.

“Well, the day isn’t going to get any younger.” He spun on his heel, marching deeper into the city.

“Thank you.” Again her words stopped him in his tracks.

“What?” Once more he faced her.

“Thank you,” she repeated. “Some of your people freed my congregation.”

“Little good it did if you’re the only one who survived.” He watched her flinch and again found himself feeling guilty for his words.

“Since you are all that survived of them, it is only right I thank you on their behalf.”

Standing speechless for far too long, Elliott honestly didn’t know what to say or do. This girl was proving more surprising by the moment. She must have sensed his uncertainty and politely departed to continue her own search efforts.

“I will not keep you from your searching.”

Elliott watched her for a moment more, then his eyes found the figure she’d been sobbing over. He didn’t see anything of any particular interest.

From his understanding, the man had the appearance of any male Sojourner. The strange beard sprouting under his chin, the brown cowl and cloak over the off-white long-sleeved tunic with black cuffs and collar—even the brown pants with black cuffs were all as he had been told. Plain. Common. Expected.

“Who were you crying over before?” Elliott called after her.

She stopped. “My father.”

Again he was unable to say or do anything but merely stood in place, watching her resume her steps for another part of the courtyard. Finally, he got control of himself again. He allowed himself one final glance at the dead Sojourner, the girl’s father, then continued with his scavenging. If there weren’t any more interruptions, he might actually get something accomplished before midday.