

Chapter 1 – The Great War

The war between the kingdoms was long and bloody, but the skill and organisation of the Etruvian army always gave them the edge. The surrounding kingdoms endeavoured to form temporary alliances against the Etruvian might, but the country's geography, with the massive Great Forest and the dreaded Waste to the south, and the primitive Trumani lands to the north, made it difficult for opponents to combine their armies in one force large enough to take down Etruvia.

With the army able to fight on its own terms, the other invading kingdoms were soundly beaten and sent home to lick their not inconsiderable wounds while stewing in their jealousy of the fantastic resources that Etruvia enjoyed. The Kingdom celebrated briefly, then went about the business of forming agreements with the other nations to ensure such conflict would never happen again. These pacts, facilitated mostly by trade, ushered in a brief golden age in Etruvian history. Even so, the great King Cedric felt it unwise to disband the army, and history would prove him to be right.

At the northern border, the Trumani, long considered to be primitive savages, began to attack border towns with increased regularity and, as it seemed to some, design. This kind of thinking was generally shouted down, but within months, the King decided it was time to build outposts along the Trumani border. While the attacks quieted for some time, soon the garrisons fell under attack, and the army was losing troops at an alarming rate. Something had to be done. Instead of sitting on their hands and allowing the increasingly frequent attacks to continue, the Military Council decided to march into Trumania and settle the matter once on and for all.

This was a high risk-high reward situation, but with the nation still recovering from the war with the other kingdoms, the Council did not believe that combating protracted guerrilla warfare was the answer. Not a lot was known of the Trumani, other than they had a tribal culture. They had spent more time fighting each other than looking towards their neighbours, but something had changed. Perhaps they had unified.

The land was known to be mostly flat with scattered woodlands, with mountains to the east and west sheltering them from their more civilised neighbours. Little was known of their battle tactics, apart from the brief skirmishes with border patrols, but they were fine warriors and surprisingly respectful of their opponents. Despite long-held rumours that they ate their dead, the Trumani lined up the corpses of their rivals and left the wounded alive, sometimes even helping them. The attacks on villages and homesteads rarely saw any deaths, as the tribesmen seemed more interested in taking livestock and food stores.

The hope of the Council was, though none made it clear, that a mere show of force would send the Trumani scurrying back to their villages, never to be heard from again.

A fine plan, at least in theory.

The Etruvian army was a sight to behold as they led almost their entire force towards Trumani soil. The knights' armour gleamed in the bright sunshine, while the discipline of the infantry was impressive as they marched in coordination. Thousands of archers brought up the rear, and it was hard to believe that any opponent on the whole continent of Balaia could stand against them. Led by the distinguished General

Thomas Rend, the army slowed its pace as it entered Trumani territory, but no sight of even a single warrior was seen as they set up camp on the first night.

The next day they passed a village where a few old men and women stood at the entrance and stared. There was little cause for concern, so the army continued on its way as it marched south into the increasingly unfamiliar territory.

The next day was slower as the Council saw fit to circumvent a reasonably large forest rather than risk a sneak attack as the army made its way through the trees.

On the third day, smoke was seen rising from a large valley, and scouts confirmed that the Trumanians were camped there, their numbers on a par with the Etruvian side. There was but one way into the valley from the northern side, but rather than taking advantage of their opponents coming down in smaller numbers, the Trumanis just stood

and watched. There was little movement from them, so General Rend ordered a camp to be set up, but put his best soldiers on watch.

The night passed uneventfully, but the first thing the Etruvians noticed in the morning was that the opposing side had doubled in size during the night, and had lined up ready for battle. A small number of Trumani broke off from the main force and walked to the midway point between the two armies. Rend barked a few commands, readying his people for battle, then led the Military Council out to meet the other party.

“You have entered our land with an army, that can only be seen as an act of war!” said their leader, a spry looking man of sixty years or so, in surprisingly good Etruvian.

“You have raided our lands, attacking our villages and garrisons. We could argue the same.”

“You cannot hold a nation accountable for the actions of a few bandits,” replied the Trumani leader. “Perhaps these attackers trouble our villagers too.”

“Ha,” laughed Rend. “Do you take me for a fool? The attacks are too well organised, the Raiders too skilled to be the actions of mere robbers. If you can guarantee the attacks stop and your army disbands, we will leave you in peace.”

“You have invaded our lands; we cannot allow that to stand. Blood must be spilled, but how much is of your choosing. We have a law of single combat here to solve disputes. Who among you would dare face our champion?”

Before anyone else could speak, Rend put himself forward. His fellow officers cried out in dismay, but Rend could not be talked down. “Why would I ask one of my men to do something I am capable of myself?” was his paltry argument.

Rend walked out to the central point again, awaiting his opponent. The Trumani began to chant, making way for a hulking giant of a man who stretched to seven feet tall and bore a wicked looking scimitar that was almost the size of Rend. The fight began in earnest, but it soon became apparent that the strength and ferocity of the Trumani champion were no match for the skill of the battle-hardened General.

Rend used his quickness to get inside the reach of the giant, nicking the warrior a dozen times. While no single cut would cause much damage, the loss of blood caused his opponent to weaken, and he stumbled backwards over a rock, crashing to the ground.

“Is this enough blood for you?” screamed Rend. “Must there more or can we leave in peace?”

Before any of the Trumani could reply, a warrior darted from the behind the General, driving a curved blade up through his back and into his heart, killing him almost instantly. A pall settled over the Etruvian army, and the Trumani began to chant and march towards the invaders. With the Council unable to deal with the shock death of their esteemed leader, the army threatened to fall into disarray. A young Corporal darted from the Etruvian line, reining in his horse and turning to his troops.

“To me, to me!” he yelled. “This fight is not over yet. Cavalry, take the centre and seek out their leaders. Infantry, prevent the Trumani from cutting off the Knights. Archers, ready your bows and aim behind the front lines. Now, Charge!”

The Corporal raced towards his dead father, slicing off the knife hand of his slayer, then driving the sword up through his chin and into the assassin's brain. Just as the Trumani forces reached Corporal Rend and threatened to engulf him, the cavalry arrived, smashing into their ranks and wreaking havoc with the warriors, many of

whom had never seen horses before. Some broke away and fled, but the constant rain of arrows took them down and rapidly depleted the Trumani reserves. The infantry arrived, and it turned into a pitched battle, with troops struggling to stay upright in the morass created by the blood and guts of the unfortunate.

After hours of the nastiest fighting any of the people on the field had even seen, the Etruvian skill and efficiency started to pay off, and they drove the Trumani back. A strange ululating cry arose, and the Trumani threw down their weapons and began to retreat. The Etruvians, in their blood frenzy, went to cut them down, but Corporal Rend halted his forces. When the armies had withdrawn, the leaders from both sides met, but the Etruvian military council returned quickly.

“They will only speak to you”, said a major whom Rend did not know. “I trust you will do the right thing.”

The rest of the Council started arguing and telling Rend what to say, but he just mounted his horse and rode out to meet the Trumani. When he arrived, the Trumani leader was kneeling, his head bowed. “Has there been enough blood spilt today?” asked the young Corporal.

“Too much blood,” replied the Chieftain. “I am sorry for the death of your General, and I am sorry for all the deaths we have both suffered. The assassin was not part of our plan, perhaps one of our Chieftains had his own agenda. I hope he learned his lesson. My respect for you and your warriors. We did not believe we could lose today.”

“I am sorry too. I hope I never have to fight a battle like this again. Make sure your people leave us in peace, and we will do the same. May we never meet again.”

The Chieftain chuckled. “Indeed young warrior. For our own sakes. I do suggest some better advisers, though.” Rend smiled, then turned his horse and headed back to his depleted force, a mere tenth of what it was that very morning. It would be a long journey back to the Capital.

When the exhausted army finally made it back home, there was more bad news. The great King Cedric was killed in a hunting accident, having fallen from his horse and broken his neck. One Major Plummer, a member of the Military Council who had just arrived back from Trumania, could not believe the King would go hunting

while his men were dying in battle and cast a number of allegations against his Council, accusing them of murder. Plummer, in turn, was accused of treason and sentenced to be hanged, but his squad broke him out of gaol, and they were last seen heading North out into The Waste.

The King's Council believed he would not survive there, letting him go but making him a wanted man in Etruvia. They also promised to groom young heir Eric for his role as King and promised to run the country as Cedric would have while Eric learned the ropes.

Corporal Rend was promoted to Sergeant, and there was much talk about how he would one day be a great General like his father.

Peace reigned for twenty years...