

Book 2

Prologue

"You can't drop a pin in Procer without hitting royalty."

-Eleusia Vokor, Nicaean ambassador to the Principate

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, idly glanced at her paperweight and pondered how satisfying it would feel to break Prince Amadis' nose with it. No such thoughts, of course, appeared on her face as she continued to listen to the ruler of Iserre lay out his objections to the Principate's current political stance. Objections was admittedly a generous term to use. One might have called the man's tone "whiny" if one cared to pass such a judgement, but properly raised ladies like Cordelia did not venture such opinions out loud. For all that southerners were convinced that the Lycaonese were one bad harvest away from barbarism, manners had been drilled into her from an early age.

"If these Callowan paupers insist on taking Proceran gold, it is only fitting they should be led by a Proceran commander," Amadis finished, the smugly self-satisfied smirk on his face tempting Cordelia's hand to drift towards the paperweight.

She allowed silence to linger long enough that the cold glare levelled onto him by Uncle Klaus started to make the Iserran shift uncomfortably before replying.

"The Liesse Rebellion is a popular uprising, Prince Amadis, at least in appearance. We must not allow the shadow of foreign interests to be cast on that image," she reminded the man patiently.

That she even had to explain this much to a ruler over twice her age was galling. For all that the Prince of Iserre had a way with intrigue, his grasp on popular opinion was... dubious. The Alamans rulers had spent so long playing the Ebb and the Flow that they were completely out of touch with the people they were supposed to rule over. *That is what happens when one is the fulcrum of a nation's political elite for nigh a thousand year*, she reflected.

"With all due respect, First Princess Cordelia,"-

"Prince," she corrected flatly. "First *Prince*."

It seemed to dumbfound southerners that she still went by the Rhenian formal address rather than the more gender-accurate one she'd gained upon her election as the ruler of the Principate. While she was technically the princess of Salia, now that she'd

gained the title of First Prince, she refused to allow the southlings to slight her heritage by refusing to acknowledge that she came from the northernmost principality of Procer. Rhenia was still backwards in some regards and the laws had never been officially amended to reflect the reality of women ruling, but she was proud of her origins nonetheless. Not that she would expect an Alamans to understand. Their own tribal confederation had joined with the disparate Arlesite holds to found the Principate and they'd never allowed anybody to forget it. *Meanwhile the Lycaonese were made part of Procer by conquest, as they are so fond of remembering for us.* Yet this particular Lycaonese was the lawfully elected ruler of the Principate and she would not allow this wretch of a man to forget it.

"Your... advice has been duly noted, Prince Amadis," she spoke calmly. "We will explore all avenues open to us, but at this point in time direct Proceran involvement does not seem like a feasible option."

In truth, imposing a foreign general would be utterly disastrous. For all that Liesse had bought an army's worth of mercenaries in Mercantis, over half of the rebellion's rank and file was peasant levies from southern Callow. Should the Countess Marchford be replaced by a prince of the Highest Assembly as Amadis so clearly desired, mass desertion would follow. Callowans were notoriously touchy about their independence and while they would fight for a restored Kingdom they would not bear arms to forge a Proceran protectorate. Amadis took the implied dismissal with ill-grace, as Cordelia had expected him to. The prince of Iserre bowed to the exact degree he was expected to and not an inch lower before leaving the room. Normally she would have taken the time to smooth over the man's ruffled feathers, but today he'd tried her patience too much. It would not do to allow him the impression he could push her this far on a daily basis. She'd have to make that statement more pointedly, of course. The man was working trade deals in Creusens, sabotaging a lucrative but not politically relevant one should get the point across. A moment passed, then Uncle Klaus rose from his seat and poured himself a glass of mead. The grizzled prince of Hannover eyed the silver-gilded goblet with puritan disdain before gulping down a mouthful.

"Not your most loyal subject, that one," Klaus grunted.

Cordelia snorted. "He would sell me out for a basket of fish," she agreed. "It would not even have to be *fresh* fish."

And yet, irksome as it was, she would continue to have to play nice with the man. Amadis had made too many alliances to be dismissed out of hand. His keeping Iserre largely out of the civil war had allowed him to emerge from the two decades of warfare with an intact power base and full coffers. In the wake of Cordelia's rise to power malcontents from the Alamans and

Arlesite principalities had flocked to him like maggots to a corpse, bolstering his power and influence to a very troublesome extent.

"He's a buffoon," her uncle decided after a moment. "Spends more gold on throwing banquets than equipping the Iserran army."

"He is a buffoon making inroads in Creusens and Segovia," she reminded him with a sigh. "That makes him a particularly dangerous specimen of the breed."

The prince of Hannover smiled wolfishly.

"Let him try his luck, then," he said. "We taught them to fear northern blades, at Lange and Aisne. A third time will sink in that lesson properly."

Cordelia loved her uncle dearly. He'd been the one to command her armies during the civil war, and she would never have managed to unite the four Lycaonese principalities without his backing. He was, in truth, one of the finest military minds in the Principate. While the principalities of the centre and the south had been playing their petty games Uncle Klaus had been taking on the endless flood of warbands trickling down from the Chain of Hunger, and when the time had come for Cordelia to claim the throne he'd shattered every army that stood between her and it. But he saw things through the lens of military affairs only, and in the Highest Assembly that was the kind of flaw that got you murdered in your bed. Amadis would not trigger another civil war, if he started to really oppose her. After twenty years of the Principate bleeding itself to death none of its rulers wanted to start another fire. He'd simply start going after her support base until she became little more than a figurehead to the Principate.

"We have other preoccupations at the moment," Cordelia murmured. "The Dominion has been shuffling around troops and Helike keeps testing Princess Francesca's borders."

"Helike's just blustering, they always do when a Tyrant gets in charge," Klaus dismissed. "They won't take on the Principate now that the civil war's over. The rest of the League wouldn't have it anyway."

"That still leaves Levant," Cordelia spoke. "The Dominion has been itching to take a bite out of Orense for decades. They would swallow the entire principality if they thought they could get away with it."

"If you're that worried, lend them the gold to rebuild their army to a decent standard," her uncle spoke flatly.

The First Prince of Procer rubbed the bridge of her nose, allowing herself the impropriety only because there was no one else in the room to see it.

"I cannot do that without removing lending restrictions for all principalities," she told Klaus.

And that was not something she could do. Not when her position was still so weak. No power could challenge the newly-founded Hasenbach dynasty as of yet, not with the kind of backing she had, but should the south be rebuilt... There were just so *many* people living down there, compared to where her power was based. Her enemies could afford to fill the ranks with fresh recruits, if they lost a battle. She could not. *And for us every loss on the field is one less soldier to man the walls when the Chain of Hunger comes again, one less watcher keeping an eye on the Kingdom of the Dead.* The south could not be allowed to regain its footing just yet, not before she'd secured the throne.

"You know I hate agreeing with the likes of Amadis on anything," Klaus spoke quietly, "but he's almost got a point. This rebellion gambit is risky. And even if they win, it won't amount to much. Liesse is an incompetent wastrel, Cordelia. He's got no business being in charge of a chamber pot, much less a kingdom."

The ruler of Procer sighed and forced herself not to fiddle with her hair. It was a bad habit, and it had taken her chambermaid the better part of an hour to style the blonde locks that morning.

"Pour me a glass, would you?" she said.

Her uncle's white brows rose in surprise. She rarely drank, mostly because she disliked the loss of control that came with being drunk. This time, though, the conversation ahead of her warranted the indulgence. Klaus wordlessly filled a cup and handed it to her. Technically speaking it was illegal for a prince to hand anything to the ruling First Prince of Procer, but when it was just the two of them she tended to ignore those little formalities. Odds were her uncle had never bothered to learn them. Regardless, she had no intention of allowing a cupbearer into her solar when they could overhear state secrets.

"We are running out of options, uncle," Cordelia admitted. "The longer we delay, the more the Empire strengthens their grip on Callow. The reports are unanimous: outside the cities, most of the Kingdom no longer cares it is under occupation. They do not think the Legions of Terror can be beaten and the standard of living for the peasantry under Praes is *better* than it was under the Fairfax dynasty. They have no stomach for rebellion and if we wait a few more years I am afraid they might actually resist an attempt to liberate them."

The prince of Hannover looked like he was about to spit in distaste until he remembered where he was sitting.

"We're not ready for a war with Praes," Klaus told her, though it visibly pained him to say it. "Not when they've got people like Black and Grem One-Eye on the other side. If we send a host through the Red Flower Vales, they'll savage it and set the border principalities on fire."

Cordelia took a deeper sip, letting the sweet taste of the honey-wine linger in her mouth.

"We can no longer afford *not* to be at war with the Empire," she replied. "And for all that you worry about the likes of the Black Knight, Malicia is the real danger."

Klaus scoffed.

"Malicia's been spending all her time keeping her nobles in line," he scorned. "And she's not the one the Legions are loyal to."

"If the Knight was intending a coup he would have already made his attempt," Cordelia noted. "Regardless, the Augur is adamant: the Pravus Bank was Malicia's doing."

At the beginning of the civil war most participants had expected it to be an affair of a single year, two at the most. Wars of succession in Procer were not unheard of when the Highest Assembly proved unable to elect a First Prince, but usually when one of the claimants proved to have a decisive advantage the principalities fell into line. Weaker rulers and regional power blocs stayed down after being inflicted a major defeat, treasuries too empty to make another bid. And yet, this time, principalities on the brink of defeat had always seemed to manage to find the funds and the weapons to stay in the Ebb.

Cordelia had been thirteen when she'd first seen how. She'd been on a diplomatic mission to Lyonis, as its prince had managed to carve out alliances neatly encircling the northern principalities, but by the time she arrived in the city the man's armies had been broken on the field by the betrayal of the princess of Lange. He'd refused to meet with her for the first few days, and when they'd finally talked he did not face her with the kind of despair she would have expected of a man in his position. He'd recently come into a great deal of gold, he'd told her, and was already raising another army with the funds. He'd even managed to secure several wagons of dwarven weaponry to equip it.

Cordelia had left the city after being assured the man had no designs to open a new front to the north, mind awl at the sudden change in the other ruler's fortunes. Where had the gold

come from, she wondered? Year after year, news trickled in of similar reversals. Even when alliances collapsed the strongest ruler among them somehow always ended up with the just the funds and the weapons to launch a counter-offensive. This was not, she had decided, a coincidence. Someone was purposefully fanning the flames of the civil war. From there, it had only been a matter of narrowing down the suspects. The name her agents found was the same every time: the Pravus Bank.

It was based in Mercantis, but that meant nothing: the City of Bought and Sold had a long history of being used as a cat's paw in international politics. Cordelia's initial attempts to find out more were met with polite misinformation and the much less polite slitting of her agents' throats. By then she'd been the ruler of Rhenia and de facto the leader of all four Lycaonese principalities but her reach that far south had been... limited. Which had been when an unexpected windfall fell into her lap. Her cousin Agnes from one of the Hasenbach branches came into the Name of Augur, overnight turning from a quiet girl overly fond of bird watching to the holder of a Role that granted indirect access to the very Heavens. And so, one augury at a time, Cordelia had narrowed down the source of the gold flowing into Procer.

Praes.

That had been... unexpected. Dread Emperors and Empresses broadly fell into two categories: the laughable and the terrifying. Thankfully for Calernia, the latter were few and far in between. For every Maleficent and Terribilis, there were ten Sinistras – whose notorious attempt to “steal Callow's weather” had resulted in the devastation of half her realm instead. The point was that, most of the time, the Dread Empire was comically inept. They used undead plagues and flying fortresses, sentient tiger armies and invisible invasions. Those grand projects inevitably failed and most backfired spectacularly. Of the Empire's seventy-odd attempts to conquer Callow only two had succeeded. And that first success was why people still thought of Praes as more than an international laughingstock: Dread Empress Triumphant. The only person to ever conquer all of Calernia and she'd done it in *ten years*. Every time some madman climbed the Tower, there was the risk he or she was cut from the same cloth.

And yet Triumphant's conquests had collapsed within five years, while Malicia's annexation of Callow still stood twenty years later. That made her an entirely new breed of Evil. Slower, more careful and in some ways even more dangerous. The Augur had found that the plan being implemented went much deeper than a mere escalation of the civil war, and Cordelia's blood still ran cold whenever she remembered her cousin's words: *the Tyrant seeks to end Procer*. Once she'd known what to look for, the patterns had emerged. The Pravus Bank systematically enabled regional powers

to fight above their means, but not enough that they would be able to expand outside of their borders. As the years passed, the Principate had become a handful of petty kingdoms in all but name, perpetually waging war on each other. And Malicia had intended for them to stay that way, forever asunder.

And so at the age of nineteen, Cordelia had gone to war. She was not a particularly gifted warrior, she knew. Like all Rhenians she was expected to man the walls if the Chain of Hunger tried to cross the Grave again, but military training had never particularly appealed to her. Instead she'd studied history and etiquette, the ways of diplomacy and intrigue – all the arts of ruling that her father had held in contemptuous disinterest. And while her uncle killed southerners, she'd made alliances. She'd schemed and betrayed, and for once the proud Alamans princes had found that their opponent's cunning ran just as deep as theirs. Six years of running battles and backroom deals, playing Creation's most elaborate shatranj game against the Tyrant in the Tower.

And, Gods forgive her, but it had worked. There was enough blood on her hands for a hundred butchers, but it had worked.

"I do not expect Liesse to succeed, though the Lone Swordsman might yet surprise us," Cordelia admitted quietly. "The rebellion is a tool crafted for a specific purpose: getting the Deoraithe into the war."

"I know the Watch has a reputation, but not even them can beat all of Praes on their own," her uncle said.

The First Prince of Procer took a hearty swallow of mead and closed her eyes.

"They will not have to, Uncle Klaus," she replied. "Liesse will last a year, perhaps two. It will be enough."

The prince of Hannover's vivid blue eyes narrowed.

"Enough for what?"

"For Procer to be ready to launch the Tenth Crusade," she whispered.

All of her problems, neatly solved with a single announcement. The Dominion was at least nominally Good, and would not nibble at their borders while they were fighting the Empire. The League of Free Cities would either keep their more Evil-inclined members in line or erupt into civil war, either of which would keep Helike busy. And while the First Prince did not legally have the right to command the private armies of the principalities, all of them were by custom bound to contribute to a Crusade. The troops of her political opponents would be abroad for years, where they

could not interfere while she stabilized the Principate. Tens of thousands would die. Callow would be broken for a generation, as the prize being fought over. But it would keep Procer together.

Cordelia loved the Principate, for all its flaws. At the end of the day it remained the greatest force for Good on Calernia, and though its history was full of mistakes and mishaps Procer was what kept the surface together. If it collapsed... Those twenty years of civil war had been but a taste of the bloodshed that would come if the Principate split. Like crows to carrion, all its neighbours would feast on the corpse of Procer and madness would seize the continent. So let Malicia plot her schemes and send her blood-soaked Knight to reap his harvest of lives. Let all of the traitors and the monsters come for her head. She was the First Prince of the Procer, the Warden of the West. Cordelia might be a Hasenbach by blood, but her mother had raised her to the ancestral words of the rulers of Hannover, the old retort thrown in the teeth of the Enemy when all its grand plans came to naught.

And Yet We Stand.

Chapter 1: Supply

"I've been informed that the position of the King Under the Mountains is that 'since only dwarves own property, only dwarves can be stolen from'. I'm afraid that if you insist on getting your family jewels back, my lord, we will have to buy them."

– Official state missive from Cygnus of Liesse, ambassador to the Kingdom Under

9th of Majwa, Ater

I strode through the doorway, black cloak trailing behind me and assorted minions following suit. I'd kept the entourage light for this one: Ratface was a must, since he was the one who knew the details, Hakram was my designated loomer and Robber rounded up the gang by somehow managing to look like he was skulking in broad daylight. Commissioner Rashid's office was larger than should have been strictly necessary for a man of his position, though I supposed there were plenty of old grandiose buildings to go around in Ater. The olive-skinned man's eyes immediately flicked to his guards when we entered, the lot of them casually dropping their hands towards their swords. *Ater City Guard, not legionaries.* While the Supply Commissioner was directly associated with the Legions, he was technically part of the Imperial bureaucracy. Good ol' Rashid had, therefore, been given his position through the Court. That probably explained why the moment Black had left the city I'd received a missive informing me that due to "unforeseen shortages" the Commissioner's Office would be unable to provide me with the promised supplies. Fucking

Heiress. She wasn't even in Praes anymore and she was still managing to piss me off.

"Lady Squire," the middle-aged Taghreb greeted me with a pleasant smile. "An unexpected pleasure. What can I do for you?"

He didn't even bother to point out that I'd shown up without an appointment. His secretary had tried to, but I'd told Hakram to show the man his teeth and suddenly the schedule had been clear for the afternoon. Funny how these things went.

"Commissioner Rashid," I replied just as pleasantly. "I came to confirm that the Fifteenth Legion's rations would be delivered on time. Just a formality, really."

The commissioner let out a saddened sigh. It almost seemed genuine.

"You must not have received my missive," he decided. "It is unfortunate, my Lady, but the supplies you were supposed to receive were lost in transit. They're halfway to Thalassina by now."

Mhm. Now, was he telling the truth about that or was it only his excuse for whatever petty bastardry Heiress had cooked up? If the supplies weren't actually in the city this was going to get complicated real fast.

"Be assured that the next shipment we'll receive has already been earmarked for the Fifteenth," he assured me.

"And when," I smiled, "will this shipment be arriving?"

"By the end of the month, should there be no trouble on the road," Rashid replied.

"Ah," I murmured. "That really is unfortunate."

Something like relief flickered through the Taghreb's eyes but it was short-lived. I reached for my Name and it coiled around my arm almost eagerly, strands of shadow weaving themselves into a spear that I threw at the Commissioner without missing a beat. The impact splintered the chair behind the man and sent him spinning across the room until he landed in an ungainly sprawl of official robes. I heard three swords leave their scabbards behind me and idly glanced at Rashid's guards. The Soninke woman in charge of them had her hand raised.

"Hold," she called out. "Get your hand off that fucking sword, Mubasa. We're not fighting godsdamned legionaries."

"Huh," I mused. "That's surprisingly sensible of you..."

"Sergeant Jaha," she provided. "I'll be frank, ma'am – I'd rather not get involved in this, if that's a possibility."

"Jaha, you traitorous bitch," the Commissioner wheezed out.

The Soninke rolled her eyes.

"The bribes were nice, Rashid," she replied, "but I'm not going to fight the girl who set half a city on fire for a measly thirty denarii. It wouldn't even cover my funeral."

Eyeing her carefully, I decided after a heartbeat that she wasn't heading out to get reinforcements.

"You are excused, Sergeant," I allowed.

Jaha let out a shaky breath, saluted and sharply smacked the back of a young boy's head when he tried to linger and glare at Hakram. Considering that my adjutant was the tallest orc I'd met so far, the sight of a scrawny boy in cheap armour trying to intimidate him was more than a little absurd.

"You appear to be getting something of a reputation," Hakram noted wryly.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"I keep telling people I'm not actually the one who used goblinfire but for some reason they think I'm playing coy," I told him.

Ratface snorted. "When a villain up and tells you they're not responsible for something, that doesn't usually mean they *didn't* do it."

"Shut up, Tribune," I muttered. "Don't give me lip in front of the Commissioner, it'll make us look unprofessional."

As if on cue, Rashid moaned and got on his knees. He was being somewhat melodramatic about this, I felt: I'd hit him with the weakest version of that power I knew. The one Black had taught me punched through plate as well as an actual spear. Robber scuttled across the room in the blink of an eye and kicked the Taghreb back down.

"Now now, Commissioner," the goblin captain purred. "None of that. It's a nice clean floor, nothing wrong with it."

I slowly took off my gloves and put them down on the man's desk, taking a few careful steps until I stood looking down on him.

"As you may have deduced, I have some objections to the timeline you've given me," I spoke calmly. "The Fifteenth is moving out

tomorrow, and the rations we have at the moment will only take us as far as Summerholm."

"You dare assault a duly appointed official of the Tower?" Rashid hissed. "I'll see you hanged for this."

I sighed. "Funny story, Rashid. May I call you Rashid?"

"No," he replied immediately.

"You're hurting my feelings, Rashid," I told him. "You should probably be careful about that. But as I was saying, funny story. Before he left, my teacher delivered a ridiculously large pile of papers at the Fifteenth's headquarters. Among those was a form called the Nihilis Report."

The Commissioner paled and I smiled thinly.

"I'm honestly not sure what's more screwed up about this," I mused. "That the Empire has a designated form for killing off bureaucrats, or that they expect me to fill it in triplicate."

"Killing me won't get you the supplies," Rashid said after a moment, managing to get back his composure – well, as much composure as man could have while lying on the ground anyway. "You'd still need the proper documentation with the Imperial seal on it."

"We'll get to that in a moment," I assured him, crouching by his side. "I have a question for you first. When Heiress got to you, was it blackmail or bribery?"

I could see the denial on his face but before he could get out a word I laid a finger on his lips. He seemed deeply offended by the act, but I could have cared less. The continued patronizing slights were keeping him off balance and I needed him that way if he was going to buy what I was selling.

"Now before you say anything, Rashid," I said. "I just want you to know something: when I met the Lone Swordsman, he had a Name trick he used. It allowed him to pick up on when people were lying. Guess what was the first thing I asked my teacher to show me?"

I did not, in fact, know the Swordsman's trick. Black had been unable to replicate it, though he was good enough at reading people that it made no real difference. I wasn't nearly there yet, but so far I was managing to even out by lying like a Mercantis chariot salesman.

"Bribery," the commissioner admitted through gritted teeth.

I sighed. "You're not making this easy on me, Rashid," I told him. "Blackmail I could have sympathized with, at least."

"I would have done it for free, *uchaffe*," he sneered.

"Oh you really shouldn't have said that," Ratface winced.

"You ever notice how it's always the Taghreb who go for the racial slurs?" I mused. "It's about time we got to the part about the seal, I think. Supply Tribune Ratface over there has the documents all ready for you. All they need a little melted wax and for you to make the impression."

"And how do you think you'll make me do that, Callowan?" the commissioner laughed, having pumped the depths of his panic and found something vaguely resembling a spine. "Torture? You don't have that in you. Why don't you just walk out of here and save yourself more embarrassment."

I patted his shoulder gently.

"You're right, I don't do torture," I agreed. "Even now, I think it's barbaric."

I got up to my feet.

"Allow me to introduce Captain Robber," I said. "He's a horrible green barbarian."

The goblin grinned malevolently at me, yellow eyes filled with glee. He enjoyed theatrics like this to a thoroughly unhealthy degree.

"You say the nicest things, Boss," he replied.

I returned my attention to Rashid, whose face had frozen.

"There's an old story in Callow," I told the commissioner in a casual tone. "It's about a fisherman who catches a magic fish in his net and finds it can talk. It offers him three wishes if he lets it go. There's a formula to it, like in all the stories: the fisherman has to close his eyes and say his wish out loud."

I picked up my gloves and gingerly put them on.

"Here's what I'm going to do, Commissioner Rashid. I'm going to say my wish out loud and leave you in this room with Robber."

My eyes turned cold.

"I get the feeling that, when I come back, there'll be seal on those papers," I finished.

Rashid's eyes flickered to Robber.

"He's just a goblin," he sneered, though I could see the fear in his eyes.

"He's a goblin I've been told keeps a jar full of eyeballs in his knapsack. I'll be honest with you, Rashid: at this point I'm a little afraid to ask whose they are."

The goblin captain's brows rose. "How do you even – *Hakram, you gossipy bitch.*"

The tall orc scratched his chin unrepentantly. "I don't get why people keep telling me things," he admitted.

I cleared my throat. "That aside, I think we're done here." I smiled at the Commissioner. "I'll see you in a bell, Rashid. Robber, try not to make too much of a mess. I don't know what they pay the cleaning staff around here but it's definitely not enough to deal with *that.*"

I hummed the first few notes of an old Laure tavern song under my breath and turned to leave. *One, two, three, four-*

"Wait!"

Oh, good. I had no real intention of having anyone tortured, so if he'd called that bluff I would have had to take another angle. I turned to face the Commissioner, smile still present. He was watching Robber unroll what seemed to be a set of sapper's tools on his desk, eyes gone white with terror.

"Do you have something to tell me, Commissioner?" I asked.

"Just give me the damn papers, Callowan," he hissed. "I'll seal them."

I motioned for Ratface to bring the paperwork forward while Robber allowed the man to get back on his feet. The goblin was pouting, the sight of that arguably the most horrifying thing I'd seen in a fortnight. In a matter of moments, the melted wax was on the requisition form and the Commissioner pressed down the Imperial seal. The Fifteenth's supplies for the march were secured.

"Now if you'd done that to begin with," I pointed out, "there would have been no need for any of this unpleasantness."

"Just get out, you smug Wallerspaw," he replied tiredly. "You have what you want."

I frowned, watching Ratface slip the papers in his scroll case from the corner of my eye.

"That's twice, you know," I noted.

The bureaucrat frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Twice you've used a racial epithet while referring to me," I clarified. "I like to think I'm a patient woman, Rashid-"

Ratface snorted, loudly.

"- but I only have so much tolerance for that kind of tomfoolery," I finished, ignoring him. "Adjutant, break two of that man's fingers."

"Aye aye, ma'am," Hakram grunted, moving forward.

"You- you can't," Rashid stammered out. "You already have what you-"

"This isn't about you, Commissioner," I told him calmly. "It's not personal, anyhow. What I'm doing is teaching the Imperial bureaucracy to mind its tongue around me. I don't expect you to stop being racist, I'm not that presumptuous. But I do expect you to be polite. I think you'll remember that, should we ever meet again."

The black cloak swirled around me as I sharply turned and made for the doorway, ignoring the sound of someone's thumb being broken immediately followed by a hoarse scream.

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By the time we got back to the Fifteenth's headquarters, Noon Bell was about to ring.

When I'd first learned that it was illegal for a legion to be posted inside the capital, I'd half-expected to end up camping in the Wasteland. Preferably with ramparts built and a constant full watch, because there was some *nasty* stuff out there. Thankfully, it wasn't the first time that one of the Legions had to be headquartered close to Ater without breaking the law: there were a handful of semi-permanent encampments a mile to the north of the city. They'd been, Hakram had informed me, where the Empire usually mustered its armies for an invasion of Callow. The irony in a Laurean girl being in command of one of those felt delicious. Stone walls with overlooking watchtowers came into sight long before even my Name-sight was able to make out the legionaries manning them. The walk was a long one but I'd decline to take Zombie along, preferring to remain on foot like the rest of my companions.

"I don't get why Treacherous was so popular," I told Ratface as we neared the gates. "I mean, he betrayed pretty much everyone that ever dealt with him."

"Admittedly he was quite insane," the Taghreb tribune agreed. "But as far as Dread Emperors go he was one of the better ones."

"I don't recall him actually accomplishing anything," I replied. "And after something like the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One there must have been a lot of rebuilding to do."

"It's the same reason westerners are fond of Bards," Hakram gravelled. "He was hilariously ineffective."

"He managed to betray a villain called 'the Betrayer', Squire," Ratface grinned. "You have to hand it to him: he might have had only one trick but he was *great* at it."

I rolled my eyes. "I'd be a little more impressed if he'd ruled longer than a decade. That kind of stupidity is why you don't put the comic relief in charge."

"You've got to respect that kind of an exit, though," Robber mused. "I mean, poisoning himself and pinning it on over a hundred different people? Man knew how to leave the stage."

Every nation had its folk figures, when it came down to it. In Callow the most popular was probably Elizabeth Alban, the Queen of Blades – who'd had so many storied tacked onto her name that it was chronologically impossible for her to have lived through all of them – but there were plenty of heroes with colourful legends attached to them. I just had a hard time understanding why the likes of Dread Emperor Treacherous had made the cut here in Praes.

"I would have thought rulers like Triumphant–"

I paused when all three of my companions pressed a knuckle to their forehead and murmured "may she never return".

"All right," I frowned. "What's that about? This isn't the first time I see people do this when she's mentioned."

Ratface grimaced. "You know how Praesi don't really have prayers?"

I raised an eyebrow. It had taken a while for me to get used to the idea that there was no organized religion for the Gods Below, after being raised on weekly sermons at the House of Light. Relationships with the Hellgods were a deeply personal matter, rarely more widespread than a family having a common shrine. Occasionally cults popped up, but Black had told me the Tower made a point of stomping those out. Not because of religious intolerance, he'd explained, but because they had a history of breaking the Imperial restrictions on human sacrifice. It was a little distressing to consider that in any case the Imperial bureaucracy could be the *lesser* Evil.

"Sure," I grunted.

"This is a prayer, Catherine. As close as we get, anyway," Hakram gravelled. "Whenever her name is spoken, anyone who's not a fool petitions the Gods Below to make sure she never manages to return to Creation."

My frown deepened, though a part of me was mildly amused when I remembered that Black had never used the prayer when referring to the Empress.

"Is that considered... likely?" I finally asked.

Robber chuckled. "You tell me, Boss. When she croaked it several of her Legions went down with her. Odds are they ended up in the same place. The old girl conquered more with less."

Huh. Well, that was definitely making it onto the list of things I was asking my teacher about next time he scryed. It wasn't like there wasn't a precedent for a mortal taking over one of the Hells, though "mortal" was a bit of a misnomer when it came to the Dead King. I made a mental note of bringing up the subject as soon as possible while the encampment's gates opened in front of us. The handful of legionaries on the watchtowers flanking it saluted as we went by and I replied with a nod, face carefully blank. Even months after the Fifteenth had been raised, I was still surprised to see Callowans in Legion armour whenever I came across them. And I came across them *often*: nearly half of my forces came from the recruitment camps in Callow, some of them having even been transferred from other Legions when my own was officially formed.

I wouldn't have believed it was a coincidence even if Black hadn't outright admitted he'd arranged it.

Why my teacher had arranged that remained unclear. The Knight never did anything without half a dozen reasons, most of them known only to himself. I'd originally thought he was doing me a favour, but integrating Callowans into the Fifteenth had proved... something of a challenge. Altercations had between soldiers had been common place during the first few weeks, though Juniper had come down hard on the troublemakers and managed to put a stop to it. Racial tensions, unfortunately, still ran high. I'd expected they would come mostly from more conservative Soninke and Taghreb elements but my fellow Callowans had turned out just as bad. It made sense, in a twisted way. The more respectable sorts weren't the kind of people who signed up for a term of service in the Legions of Terror. The core of my Callowan recruits was made up of thieves and murderers who'd avoided the noose by 'volunteering' for service, and few of them were actually pleased to be here.

Things had come very close to a general brawl when the goblin elements of the Fifteenth had launched into a spree of borderline vicious pranks targeting the newcomers. It was, Pickler had later

told me, tradition in the Legions. A hazing ritual meant to make fresh recruits earn their membership in the ranks. The Callowans had seen them as personal attacks instead, and several legionaries – goblins and humans alike – had ended up in a healer's tent when tempers rose. The only good thing to come out of it was that all the wounded had insisted they'd ended up with broken bones through 'training accidents' instead of admitting they'd been fighting, falling back on common mistrust of authority when the time to hand out sanctions had come. I'd spent more than one evening discussing the subject with my Legate, but Juniper was largely unworried. She believed that the Fifteenth would come together after its first major engagement, regardless of prior tensions.

Personally, I thought that a large part of the problem came from the fact that there were no Callowan officers higher in rank than sergeant. Unfortunately there was no quick solution to this: the only people from the Kingdom who'd gone through the War College were Deoraithe, and none of them had stuck around to serve in the Legions afterwards. I couldn't very well appoint a legionary from the ranks to a lieutenantship just for being Callowan when I had actually qualified candidates from other backgrounds available to me. *Battle casualties will allow for field promotions, unpleasant as that thought is. We'll see if any distinguish themselves enough to warrant a rise up the ranks.* Robber peeled off from the group a few moments after we entered, returning to his company, but both Hakram and Ratface followed me to the walled bastion serving as the Fifteenth's centre of operations.

As my adjutant Hakram was, officially, serving as my liaison to the legion. Practically speaking, he'd mostly ended up getting me up to date on reports and handling the bulk of the paperwork that kept flowing in my direction. Supply Tribune Ratface, on the other hand was part of Juniper's General Staff. He served as the head of the Fifteenth's supply and logistics. It was apparently custom to refer to an officer in his position as the Quartermaster, though it wasn't his official title. The pair of orcs – former Rat Company, both of them – posted at the bastion's door saluted as we passed by, ushering us into the room where most of the Fifteenth's senior officers were already assembled. A handful of old tapestries covered roughly-hewn walls, their colours long faded though they were kept scrupulously clean of dust. The large stone table that was the centrepiece of the room was covered by a map of southern Callow, iron figurines placed where the Sixth and Ninth legions were positioned as of the last dispatches. Four copper knights had been set in the spots where skirmishes between the Duke's forces and the Legions had already erupted.

Legate Juniper stopped speaking the moment we entered, turning her gaze onto me. The three other people in the room did the same after a heartbeat. Commander Hune was of about average height,

for an ogre, which still meant she had to hunch over uncomfortably to avoid hitting her head onto the ceiling. The patient cleverness in her eyes contrasted with the brutish cast of her face, a hint at the sharp mind that lay beneath it. Hune Egeldotir had been the captain of Tiger Company, back in the College, and she'd come highly recommended to me by both Juniper and Hakram. Next to her, tapping his fingers against the stone, stood Commander Nauk. He sent a cheerful grin my way, pushing one of the knight figures half an inch forward when Juniper wasn't looking. *Oh, that's going to drive her crazy when she notices it.* Nauk was, I reflected, a bit of a bastard. But he was *my* bastard, and that made all the difference.

If the orc commander was my creature, though, then there was no denying that Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara was Juniper's. Getting the Taghreb former captain on her staff had been, so far, the only favour my Legate had asked of me. I'd made a point of seeing it done: the deeper in my debt Juniper was, the better. Besides, she was too much of a professional to make the request if she didn't think the Fifteenth would benefit from it. I'd kicked up the request to Black, and within two bells Scribe's bureaucratic wizardry had seen to it that Aisha was one of mine.

"Lady Squire," Juniper gravelled. "I take it all went well?"

I repressed a twitch at the formal address she insisted on keeping using. In some ways I'd preferred it when she constantly insulted me, mostly because the interaction felt more honest. But since the very moment the Fifteenth had been officially formed, she'd turned horribly formal on me and no amount of telling her to do otherwise had managed to break her of the habit.

"Well," I mused. "I'm not getting invited to any social occasions for the foreseeable future but we have the papers."

Commander Nauk barked out a laugh, elbowing Aisha in the sides – she eyed him like he'd just spit on a silk dress and quietly stepped on his foot. His steel-capped boots were thick enough he didn't even notice.

"Gave them the old Callow treatment, did you?" the orc snickered.

"Is it really the original Callow treatment if nothing explodes, though?" Ratface wondered.

"Whoever gave you the impression you're funny has a place waiting in the worst Hell, Quartermaster," Juniper grunted. "When are we getting the rations?"

"They'll be in our stocks before nightfall," Ratface replied, thoroughly unoffended. "I appear to have misremembered the actual number of soldiers in the Fifteenth, so we'll end up with some surplus."

There was a reason the handsome Taghreb was our Supply Tribune. He had a way of getting his hands on whatever we needed and a little more, no matter how much bureaucracy stood in his way. I'd considered asking him exactly how he managed that, but a crate of Vale summer wine had appeared in my quarters before I could. How he'd even known it was my favourite drink was a mystery, as was the way he'd gotten his hands on it when Vale itself was currently one of the main strongholds of the rebellion.

"Useful," Hune spoke mildly, her voice surprisingly delicate for a woman her size. "We can trade with other Legions on the way to the front."

"Discretion will be key," Aisha murmured. "A certain amount of that is tolerated, but it's technically against regulations."

I'd made all of my senior officers aware of why exactly we needed to toe the line of Legion rules, at least in appearance. There was no telling where Heiress had friends just waiting to kick up a fuss.

"Oh you know me," Ratface smiled. "Discretion is my middle name."

Aisha rolled her eyes, not deigning to humour him further.

"We'll be ready to march tomorrow, Legate?" Hakram gravelled, getting the conversation back on track before I needed to step in.

"There should be no further issue," Juniper agreed. "We'll be off with dawn."

I hummed, rather pleased.

"This will be the last staff meeting we have in this camp, then," I said. "It feels like something that should be celebrated with drinks. Only the one cup, though, I'll have to get going soon."

Juniper frowned as Hakram passed her by to pick up a carafe of wine. "You have another appointment?"

I grimaced. "I've received summons to the Tower. The Empress requests that we have a talk."

A ripple of curiosity went through my officers.

"There's no court session tonight, so I'm assuming it will be a private meeting?" the Staff Tribune probed.

"The message didn't specify," I replied. "Just to be sure, Aisha, would there be an issue with my wearing armour? I don't actually own court dress."

The Taghreb aristocrat shook her head. "If you're summoned in your station as the Squire, military apparel is appropriate. You're a little young for the Empress' usual tastes, anyhow."

I raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware Malicia was inclined towards women."

Aisha shrugged. "She hasn't added men to the Imperial seraglio since her ascension, so that's the current belief."

My eyes narrowed in distaste. "She *kept* the seraglio? Weeping Heavens, she used to be a concubine. She should know better."

The Staff Tribune met my eyes unflinchingly. "With all due respect, my Lady, your Callowan is showing. The Imperial seraglio is, above all, a political institution. Of course Malicia keeps one."

"I'm not seeing anything particularly political about keeping a stable of women to sleep with, Bishara," I replied flatly.

"That's because you think this is about sex," she replied bluntly. "It isn't. Consorts only share a bed with a Tyrant if they wish to. High Lords and Ladies send relatives into the seraglio to openly back a ruler or curry influence. Traditionally it's a way for an Emperor or Empress to install individuals of unsuitable background at Court without going through the bureaucracy."

"*Traditionally*," Ratface repeated quietly. "Let's not forget Nefarious, and he wasn't the first."

"Keep your personal politics out of this, Hasan," Aisha retorted harshly. "That Emperor Nefarious turned his seraglio in some sort of... sordid sex dungeon was a sign he'd lost the ability to rule, and he paid for it with his life."

I raised a hand. "All right, that's enough. I wasn't aware there were nuances to this, or I obviously wouldn't have stuck my foot so forcefully in my mouth. I fully intend to continue this discussion at some point, Aisha, since it seems like a glaring hole in my political education. Now's not the moment, though."

"We're leaving Ater behind tomorrow," Juniper spoke, stare sweeping across all the officers. "We will be leaving politics with it."

It wasn't a question. We grabbed glasses and the wine was passed around, the harsh Wasteland red Hakram had fetched making the rounds. I raised my cup.

"To the Fifteenth," I announced.

Nauk laughed.

"We march West, once more," the tall orc quoted in Mthethwa.

"Waging that same old war," we all echoed, cups clinking together.

It was just as well none of us had spoken the rest of the famous verse.

Onward to the fields of Callow,

Swift death and graves shallow.

Chapter 2: Demand

"The closest equivalent I've found to the Imperial court is the act of shoving your hand in a bag that could be full of jewels but is, most of the time, full of razor blades."

– Extract from the personal memoirs of Dread Empress Maleficent II

The two-hundredth level of the Tower was surprisingly, well, not horrifying.

Admittedly there were more skull carvings woven into the relief than I was strictly comfortable with, but the boudoir where I'd ended up cooling my heels until Malicia was ready to see me was pretty comfortable. The armchairs had been designed to accommodate people wearing plate armour as I currently was, and a servant had helpfully put out a carafe of what looked like good Liessen wine. It broke my heart that I couldn't pour myself a cup, but the last time I'd stepped foot in the Tower all the available refreshments had been poisoned and I wasn't going to risk a repeat performance for a drink. I was getting more than a little restless, sitting alone in the room and waiting on one of the most powerful women in Calernia.

It wasn't the armour that had me feeling awkward: Hells, it was my default getup these days. Besides, Hakram had seen to it that it got polished even if the thought had never crossed my mind, because my minion was a godsdamned prince among adjutants. I'd even gotten used to the cloak, though it had a way of making everything I did seem overly theatrical. And the sword... well, at least it was goblin steel. I could have done without the goblinfire-green bells my teacher had gotten the pommel sculpted as, but I'd grown familiar with the arming sword. Besides, there was no escaping the Black Knight's dubious sense of humour.

That particular thought was a great deal fonder than it would have been a few months ago. The problem with Black, I'd found, was that he was a *likeable* monster. It was hard to remain as guarded as I should be around him when he constantly went out of his way to make things easier for me. The memory of that

afternoon in Summerholm when I'd seen his true face remained fresh, but it battled with the evenings like when the two of us had stood out in the rain and he'd been almost... comforting. As comforting as a man like him could be, anyway.

He was manipulating me, of course, but that didn't mean his actions weren't genuine. He wouldn't be half as good a manipulator if they weren't.

The longer I spent with my teacher the more the way he did things seemed reasonable, and that terrified me more than anything else.

I can like him and still consider him my enemy, I told myself silently. I paced across the room, following the relief of some ancient battle as I did. The Praesi displayed seemed to be on the defensive, for once, but I didn't recognize the battlefield. The twin bells of the Fairfax dynasty were among the banners of the invaders but there were half a dozen other displays of heraldry I was unfamiliar with.

"The Fourth Crusade," a voice came from behind me.

My hand immediately dropped to my sword as I swivelled, but the woman facing me was unarmed. Not a servant – she wasn't wearing the Tower's livery – but I couldn't recall seeing her the last time I'd been here. *Not that that means much.*

"Excuse me?" I replied after a heartbeat.

"It's a depiction of Dread Emperor Terribilis turning back the Fourth Crusade," the woman repeated.

Ah. The heraldry I hadn't recognized must have been from the Crusader Kingdoms that the second Terribilis had spent his lifetime dismantling. I let a moment pass as I took a closer look at the stranger. Dark skin and short plaited hair, she had those typical Soninke high cheekbones and nearly golden eyes. Her tunic was a deep green and high-collared, a fashion I'd noticed before in the streets of Ater. Not that any of this helped me figure out who the Hells I was talking to. I cleared my throat.

"Is it time for me to go in, then?" I asked.

The woman shook her head lightly, reaching for one of the cups by the carafe and pouring herself one.

"The Liesse Rebellion has complicated tax collection in Callow for the year, Malicia will be settling the details for a little while longer," she replied. "It's not poisoned, by the way, if you were wondering."

As if to lend her words credence, she took a small sip from her cup. I raised an eyebrow. My first thought had been that I might

be dealing with a heavily disguised version of Malicia trying to pick my brains before we met, but that was becoming more unlikely by the moment. Was she some sort of attendant, then? Might as well play along for the moment. *There's a reason Black taught me the Name trick to burn basic poisons out of my system.* I strode across the room and poured myself a cup of my own.

"And who would you be?" I asked after taking a sip and allowing the sweet, musky taste to fill my mouth.

The woman smiled, artfully sitting down in one of the armchairs.

"No one important," she replied.

"Villain, then," I grunted. "Only people who ever get that shifty about their job description."

And yet I wasn't feeling a Name coming off of her. Oh, that particular trick wasn't perfect – I'd yet to manage to get anything off Scribe, and Black could blink out of existence for me if he focused – but it wasn't something just anybody could fool. My level of wariness went up a notch.

"I do not have a Name, so you can stop squinting," she replied in a drily amused tone.

I coughed to hide my embarrassment.

"Are you really going to make a guessing game out of this?" I asked. "I guess that's one way to pass the time."

She folded her hands primly over her lap. "You may consider me Malicia's equivalent of what Scribe is to Amadeus," she said.

I frowned. "Secretary?"

"Spymistress," she corrected. "Let's not pretend that Scribe doesn't run one of the largest information networks on the continent."

"I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to admit that out loud," I grunted. "I don't suppose you have a name? 'No one important' is a bit of a mouthful."

She chuckled. "You can call me Ime," she replied.

I raised an eyebrow. "Patience in Mthethwa," I noted. "There's a fake name if I ever heard one."

"Secrets are my trade," she said. "It would hardly be proper for me to reveal my actual name on our first meeting."

I hummed and refused to humour that line of conversation any further. If my last evening at the Tower had taught me anything,

it was that if I played courtly games I was going to lose. Badly. Better to stick to battlefields where I had a chance of carrying the day.

"Catherine Foundling," I introduced myself, well aware that if she really was who she said she was then there was little chance she didn't already know that.

"Interesting," Ime murmured.

"How's that?" I replied warily.

"Most individuals with a Role introduce themselves by their Name," she noted. "I wonder if that disassociation is related to your origins."

"I'm sure I'm not the first Callowan villain," I spoke through gritted teeth.

"Hardly," Ime acknowledged. "Yet Callowan villains were usually related to a Callowan pattern: overly ambitious uncles, warmongering commanders. For a girl born in Laure to become the Squire – a largely Praesi Name – is unprecedented. In many ways you are setting the standard for any who would follow in your path."

"I'm sure there's a point to this," I replied flatly. "If you'd kindly get to it."

Ime shrugged. "I'm trying to understand why Amadeus chose you to be his apprentice. Your marks at the orphanage's education facilities weren't particularly remarkable – I read your essay on the Licerian Wars and it was rather sloppy."

Oh Gods, I couldn't believe that a piece of homework I'd written half-drunk in the backroom of the Rat's Nest had ended up in the hands of the fucking *spymistress of the Empire*. I forced my face to remain blank.

"I don't think he picked me because of my academic record," I said.

"Mhm, yes," Ime hummed. "Your ranking in the Pit was more to your credit. Also a warning sign, of course. It was one of the reasons your file was flagged, along with your antisocial tendencies."

"I'm not *antisocial*," I retorted before I could help myself. "I'm just – never mind, not worth arguing over. What does that even mean, my 'file was flagged'?"

I didn't even bother to address the fact that everyone and their mother seemed to know I'd been part of an illegal underground fighting ring. *Hells, Booker, what kind of a show were you running?*

"You were considered a potential heroine," Ime informed me. "Your stated interest in the War College was a mitigating factor, but agents of the Tower kept an eye on you regardless."

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, but I was spared the effort of figuring it out when a small gong rang in the distance and the spymistress gracefully rose to her feet.

"Malicia seems to be done," she said. "If you'll follow me, Lady Squire?"

I bit down on a 'do I have a choice?' and fell behind her. The boudoir led to a larger antechamber covered in wood panelling, but our pace was too brisk for me to stop and take in the scenery. The door at the end of the room opened into a larger chamber, this one more classic Praesi architecture. Polished black marble everywhere, with the occasional gold inlay shining in the candlelight. Large tinted glass windows in the back allowed the fading sunlight to filter in, casting shades of red and gold on the long rectangular table that took up the middle of the room. At the head of the room, sitting in an armchair ostentatious enough to qualify as a throne, sat Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name. I bowed my head.

"Your Most Dreadful Majesty," I greeted her.

Deference, but no kneeling. The urge was there but I remembered standing alone with my teacher, surrounded by our enemies. *We do not kneel*. The words still sent a shiver up my spine whenever I thought of them. The Empress laughed, the sound as enchanting as I remembered.

"There's no need for any of that, Catherine," she spoke gently. "This is a private audience."

"Technically," Ime pointed out, "this is a session of the Imperial council. Two members out of five is the necessary quorum."

Malicia rolled her eyes at the spymistress. "I see you've been helping yourself to the wine, darling."

I allowed the banter to pass me by without commenting, still unsure as to what exactly my position was relating to them. Or even why I was here in the first place. Would it have killed them to have put a mention of that in the summons? I studied the Tyrant in silence, trying to gauge her intentions. Pretty much all I got out of it was that the woman was gorgeous, which I'd already known. She was not, however, as attention-grabbing as she'd been in Court. Part of that must have been that she was wearing a much less flamboyant green dress the exact shade of Ime's tunic, but that couldn't be all. It wasn't that she was any less striking, just that... *It's not as difficult to ignore*. My

fingers tightened imperceptibly. *Name shenanigans, I'd put my hand to flame on it.* Ime claimed the chair to the left of Malicia, immediately beginning to drum against the armrest.

"Your Majesty," I began.

The Empress raised an eyebrow. "Malicia," she corrected me. "You and I will be working together for a long time, Catherine. I've found being overly formal tends to be a hindrance in those cases."

"Malicia," I repeated with a grimace. Gods, that felt weird. "I hope I'm not being overly bold, but I have no idea whatsoever as to why I'm here."

The lovely heart-shaped face remained unreadable for a moment, then she cracked a smile. Shaking her head ruefully, she turned to Ime.

"She might as well be his daughter," the Empress said.

Ime smirked. "Little off-colour, but the resemblance is there."

I quietly choked on my tongue.

"Excuse me?" I managed to croak out.

Malicia waved a hand lazily. "There's nobility in the Empire that would cheerfully murder their firstborn for the opportunity to discuss the weather with me, my dear. It seems Amadeus has rubbed off on you more than I'd thought."

I bit the inside of my cheek. "My apologies, I meant no-"

"No one's taking offence, Lady Squire," Ime interrupted, the intonation she gave the last words almost mocking.

I glared at her. "Forgive me for being a little nervous in the presence of the godsdamned *Dread Empress of Praes*, Lady Ime."

I started wincing before the words even finished leaving my lips. *My temper is going to get me killed one of these days. Hells, maybe even today.* Malicia chuckled exquisitely.

"Lady Patience? A little on the nose, darling," she said.

Ime looked mildly offended. "I'm the Imperial spymistress. I have a mystique to protect."

"Save it for the unwashed masses," the Empress replied. "They might actually be impressed. That said, Catherine, it might not be the wisest course of action to damn a ruler to her face. We do not call on the Gods as casually in Praes as they do in Callow."

"I'll, er, remember that," I muttered, too relieved my outburst hadn't gotten more of a reaction to muster anything more substantial.

The Empress smiled. "My summons was not a mere social call, as it happens. Our respective duties have kept us both rather busy of late, but I wanted us to have a face-to-face meeting before you left for Callow."

A good thing she'd not called it 'the provinces' this time. My game face wasn't good enough yet to hide the kind of resentment that would have caused.

"Did you ever wonder why your teacher took you as a pupil?" Malicia asked in a murmur.

And just like that, she had the entire weight of my attention bearing down on her. Oh, I'd wondered all right. More than once that particular question had kept me up at night, along with the worry that I was playing into whatever greater plan he had in the works.

"The question has crossed my mind once or twice," I replied quietly.

Her expression was friendly, but her eyes were sharp as daggers. Her looks made it so very easy to forget that Dread Empress Malicia was the longest-reigning Tyrant in several hundred years. One did not get to keep the Tower that long without being very, very good at their job.

"Amadeus is, without a doubt, the most talented example of his Name to grace Praes in a dozen generations," she said matter-of-factly. "Unfortunately, he has also made so many enemies that within twenty years he will be unable to function effectively as my Black Knight."

My blood went cold. That was... not the conversation I'd expected to be having when I received the summons, to put it lightly. What she was saying had large implications. Empire-shaking implications.

"I was aware he had enemies in the nobility," I replied cautiously. "I'd not been given to understand that the situation was quite that bad."

"Part of it is our fault," Malicia sighed.

"He's been the hatchet man for this regime since the very beginning, and the cost is starting to show," Ime contributed mildly.

I'd almost forgotten she was there.

"Every time we had to keep the High Lords in line," the Empress explained, "Amadeus was the one kicking down the doors, so to speak. The only reason he hasn't been rewarded for this by a knife in the back is that we've already co-opted all the hired killers worth the name."

"That and Assassin's been cleaning house like it's going out of style," Ime smiled. "Busy little bee, he's been."

"You think he means for me to replace him," I forced out, almost afraid to say the words.

"A Squire must, in time, become a Knight," Malicia replied softly.

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Then that means Heiress is another possible successor," I finally said.

"Sweet Akua's designs are a little grander than that, I'm afraid," Ime snickered.

"Ambition is a good thing, in a young girl," the Empress chided her. "Yet I fear her aspirations will be frustrated. The Age of Wonders is over, Catherine. The days where a single madwoman with a flying fortress could cow a continent are long gone. Creation is a smaller place now, one that rewards base cleverness over glorious enterprise."

I didn't see anything glorious in a crazy Tyrant raining down fire on their neighbours, but that was the Praesi for you. Over a millennium of being run by villains had warped their culture to the bone.

"That is the reason you were summoned to the Tower before your departure and she was not," Malicia continued. "You represent a legacy, Catherine, a different way of doing things. And so I will ask you the same question I asked Amadeus, before he helped me claim the Tower." The Dread Empress leaned forward. "What do you want?"

I blinked. I'd thought I understood where this conversation was going. A few words of warning, a little more putting on the charm, and then I'd be sent off with a pat on the head. This was... She was taking me seriously, and that wasn't something I'd come to expect of the nobles of the Wasteland. Hells, what could you even say to the second most powerful woman on a continent asking you what you wanted? *I want Callow to be free, in fact if not in name. I want your nobles to stop plundering the land of my birth like it's their Gods-given right. I want peace, even if it's under the aegis of the Tower. And the next time one of your dogs steps out of line, I want the power to put their head on a pike.*

All of those I could have told her, but they revealed too much to this woman I still knew little about and trusted even less.

"That's a complicated question," I replied instead, face blank.

"Most worth asking are," Ime commented.

"Don't be obnoxious, sweetling," Malicia sighed. "I understand this is unexpected, Catherine, and I will not press you for an answer today. All I ask is that you think on it."

The Dread Empress leaned back in her seat, every inch of her turning regal as she eyed me inscrutably.

"This is Praes, Catherine Foundling," she said. "Our ways are harsh, but they are not without graces. Power earned is yours to do with as you wish. Remember that, when putting down the rebellion you set into motion. Sacrifices are meaningless if they do not lead to an outcome."

For the second time since I'd stepped into the room, my blood ran cold. She knew. She *knew*. How could- no it didn't matter. If she'd wanted me dead for this she wouldn't have needed proof, and not even Black would have tried to stop her. I let out a shaky breath and bowed my head in acknowledgement of the implied dismissal. Ime pushed back her chair and rose to her feet, casually making her way to me and clapping my shoulder. I resisted the urge to push off her hand.

"I'll see you out, Lady Squire," the spymistress said. "The Tower can be rather dangerous, to those who are strangers to it."

"No argument there," I muttered, allowing her to steer me out of the chamber.

Her steps slowed as we passed through the antechamber, the door closing soundlessly behind us.

"Your legion will pass through Summerholm," Ime suddenly said.

I eyed her cautiously. "It's the only land route, yes."

"Warlock will be there," she informed me. "So will his son."

I blinked in surprise. "His son? I thought he..."

"Married an incubus?" she smiled. "Yes, the rumours are true. Very well-behaved creature, for a personification of lust. They adopted."

"Huh," I grunted. "Interesting. Why are you telling me this?"

"The boy recently came into the Name of Apprentice," she replied. "Their presence in the city is not a coincidence."

Ah. *Power calls to power*, my teacher always said. My fingers tightened. A mage with that kind of firepower at his disposal would be quite the trump card, but I'd been in Praes long enough to know that assumptions paved the path to disappointment. Or an early grave.

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied.

"You'll have seen all the Calamities save Ranger after that," Ime mused. "Not many people can claim the same."

I frowned. "I've never met Assassin either," I pointed out.

She shot me a pitying look. "It would be a mistake to think that means Assassin has never met *you*," she replied.

I grimaced. "And to think I was starting to run out of nightmare material."

Ime hesitated, then allowed me to pass through the doorway to the boudoir first.

"A word of advice, Foundling," she murmured, leaning close. "When people pick out the most dangerous among Amadeus' entourage, they think of Ranger or Warlock. They are wrong."

I kept my face blank and met her eyes.

"Be very careful around Scribe," she spoke in a whisper. "Do not ever let her believe you are a threat to him. If she does, she won't call down Hellfire or come swinging a sword. One night, you will simply... disappear, and no body will ever be found."

I swallowed.

"You're being very helpful," I replied.

I let the following *and why is that?* unspoken. The spymistress' hand came to rest on her throat and her eyes went distant.

"I owe your teacher a debt," she said. "He chose mercy once, when he had every right to do otherwise. I've made a habit of settling that score whenever I can."

We made our way out of the Tower in silence after that, each lost in our own thoughts.

Chapter 3: Cost

"Sooner or later, the Tower always gets its due."

– Praesi saying

Spices were a rarity in Callow, and before Ater I'd ever only tasted salt.

I shovelled in another mouthful of biryani, enjoying the taste of cumin and pepper. Some part of me felt vaguely guilty about enjoying the dish so much: the amount of spices used to season the rice alone would have sold for enough in Laure to buy three meals. The chicken with caramelized onion sauce that accompanied it wasn't exactly my favourite – I'd never been one for sweets – but after a visit to the Tower I figured I could use the energy. The Sword and Cup, Aisha's old haunt, had become the unofficial watering hole for the Fifteenth over the last few months. The Staff Tribune had managed to exact the concession that our legionaries paid less on drinks, a deal the owner had become more than happy with when the steady stream of patrons had started coming in whenever on leave.

Ratface had been the one to introduce me to biryani, mildly horrified when I'd confessed I had no idea what cumin tasted like. He'd rolled his eyes when Hakram had pointed out how the oddity of a Taghreb being so fond of Soninke cooking, pointing out that sharing a *mezze* with legionaries was a good way to go home with an empty stomach. Apparently Taghreb were fond of putting out large plates for communal eating, a concept utterly foreign to me. Sharing a plate with someone in Callow was a sign of deep intimacy, and done in public only by gushing young lovers. Still, it was far from the strangest custom I'd encountered in the Wasteland.

I'd never actually met the owner of the Sword and Cup, but the staff had been taught to recognize me by sight. The moment I stepped in I was ushered up into a private room, only stopping to exchange a few words with some of my off-duty legionaries. Taghreb, Soninke, orcs and even a goblin – but no Callowans. They had a preferred tavern of their own, I'd been informed, run by a retired member of the Thirteenth Legion. I could understand the urge to cling to what you knew, but that didn't make it any less of a problem for me. *Off-duty is where friendships are made.*

I put down my spoon and took a long pull from my tankard, the warmth of ale washing away the last remnants of the tension my meeting with the Empress had set in my shoulders. I'd learned enough during that single hour to chew on for the better part of the coming campaign, and little of it had been good. That the Warlock and his son were in Summerholm was the most immediate danger, in my opinion. For all that the man was my teacher's ally, I'd have to tread very carefully around him: people didn't get a nickname like the 'Sovereign of the Red Skies' by cultivating pretty gardens.

My train of thought was interrupted by someone softly knocking at the door and I frowned. It was a little early for someone to come

to pick up my plate, and the staff wasn't in the habit of disturbing me without good reason.

"Come in," I called out.

A middle-aged Soninke woman opened the door and bowed apologetically.

"An officer from the Fifteenth requests an audience, my Lady," she informed me.

I raised an eyebrow, very much doubting that was the phrasing that had actually been used. I'd encouraged most officers I worked with to do away with the courtesies that had started flowing in after I openly admitted to being the Squire. The exaggerated servility was rather grating.

"Who?" I asked.

The few people I shared meals with on a regular basis should have been in camp at the moment, seeing to the last preparations for our departure.

"She introduced herself as Senior Mage Kilian," the woman replied.

My brow rose even higher. A pleasant surprise then, but Kilian was *definitely* supposed to be in camp. As Senior Mage she didn't have a command of her own, but she was a member of the General Staff and charged with overseeing all mage operations in the Fifteenth. She should have been coordinating with Ratface to make sure our healers had all the necessary stock for what promised to be a rather bloody affair.

"Show her in," I replied.

The woman bowed again. "By your leave, my Lady," she murmured.

I leaned back in my seat and drank another mouthful of ale, not even having time for a repeat performance before Kilian entered the room in full legionary armour. Well, mage's armour anyway. The mage lines in companies were issued a kit lighter than even the regulars, since the use of magic was so physically draining. Mages had been known to pass out inside the old one, before the Legions had adjusted their kit. Still, she was a sight for sore eyes. Kilian wasn't strikingly pretty, but she had the kind of looks that were more attractive the more you paid attention to her. Or so I told myself. It would have been a little shallow of me to develop an interest just because of the red hair and her ability to light a man on fire at twenty paces.

"Catherine," she greeted me, saluting under my amused stare.

"Kilian," I replied. "I'd order you a plate, but I'm getting the impressions there's pressing news."

The mage eyed the remains of my biryani with longing for a moment before she squared it away.

"There's a... situation in the camp," she grimaced.

I sighed. "They couldn't have waited for me to finish my plate, at least?"

The redhead's lips twitched. "Deserters are rarely so considerate."

Deserters? That got her my full attention.

"Are you telling me we've lost legionaries before we even left the Wasteland?" I asked flatly.

"Only shortly," she replied. "They were caught close to the city by one of our patrols."

And to think I'd believed Juniper's insistence to change the patrol schedules randomly had been pointless. I frowned, studying the Senior Mage's expression.

"They're Callowans, aren't they?" I realized. "Juniper wouldn't have sent you otherwise."

The mage nodded slowly. "Two of them, one a sergeant."

I resisted the urge to curse. *How the fuck am I supposed to start pulling Callowans up the ranks when the few officers from home I do have are deserting?* I pushed aside my plate, appetite lost.

"Where are they being held?" I asked tiredly.

"Legate Juniper had one of the fort's cellars converted into a cell," Kilian replied, then hesitated.

My frown deepened. We had tents set aside for disciplinary measures. There should have been no need for the Hellhound to go that far.

"There's more," I spoke calmly. "Kilian, what happened?"

The Senior Mage grimaced again, the expression out of place on her elfin face. "They stabbed two legionaries trying to escape when they were caught. One of them is in critical condition. The healers say he might not make it through the night."

I was too old to start throwing tantrums, and that was the only reason I didn't smash my fist into the table. That and the

Fifteenth's finances were tight enough already without needing to replace civilian tables.

"The *bloody* idiots," I hissed.

Desertion was bad enough – unless there were some very extenuating circumstances, it was a capital offence – but that they'd employed violence in trying to escape made it that much worse. If the wounded soldier didn't make it, the Legion's regulations were clear. *Stoned to death by the dead legionary's line*. A public spectacle like that was the last thing I needed before we marched into war: all the tensions that had gone underground would flare up again. Kilian remained silent, looking deeply uncomfortable. At least I knew why Juniper had sent for me. She'd want to avoid a stoning as much as I did. Yet my Legate couldn't execute the deserters without assembling a court-martial, and that would take time. Time we might not have, if the wounded soldier died in the night. The only way around that was, well, *me*. As a Named apprenticed to the Black Knight himself, I had the legal authority to kill anyone under my command without bothering with the judicial niceties. It was a holdover from the old days that Malicia had been careful to maintain: it had allowed my teacher to clean house in Callow as much as needed without seeking the Tower's permission every time. I passed a hand through my hair.

"Did you come by horse?" I asked Kilian.

"Requisitioned a mount from the Imperial messengers' stable," she nodded.

"Get a fresh one," I ordered. "The quicker this is dealt with, the better."

—

Night had fallen by the time we got back to camp.

The wounded man was still alive, thank the Gods. The Fifteenth's healers had dealt with his wounds on the surface, but they could do nothing about the internal bleeding. Most of the medical jargon they'd used had gone over my head, but the gist of it seemed that one of the organs in the stomach that were too delicate to fix using magic had been torn through when the man had gotten stabbed. I felt another flare of anger at the thought of it: stomach wounds were a *bad* way to go. The legionary had gotten a potion for the pain, but there wasn't much more the healers could do. Juniper was in a mood when we met, unsurprisingly.

"That kind of shit is why we spread out foreigners across multiple legions," she growled, pacing across the room. "I don't

know what the fucking Marshals were thinking, giving us so many recruits from the same place."

We both knew the Marshals had little to do with it, but Juniper had always been reluctant to speak ill of Black in any way.

"It's done," I replied wearily. "Pot's broke, crying's not going to get the water back in."

"Do you see anyone crying?" she snarled. "My Lady," she added a moment after, with visible effort.

I waved away the unspoken contrition. If she was finally starting to get stick out of her ass when it came to me, I wasn't going to get picky about her language.

"I don't suppose there's still a way to keep this quiet?" I asked her.

The orc shook her head. "I ordered the legionaries who apprehended them to remain silent, but it'll out sooner or later. Besides, the officers in charge of their lines will need a reason for why they're not reporting for duty."

The answer wouldn't be pretty for either of the cases, unfortunately.

"The deserters are both from the same line?" I asked.

Juniper nodded. "Their lieutenant hadn't even noticed they were missing," she growled. "Our officer corps is too green, Foundling. They'll make mistakes on the field. I wish we'd had time to run war games before being deployed."

I smiled mirthlessly. One day, maybe I'd tell her why Callow had rebelled now and not ten years in the future. Not today, though, and I'd make sure she hit the *aragh* first.

"They're sending us in the thick of it *because* we're still green, Juniper," I replied. "Black's been tight-lipped about it, but I think there's more to this than just a rebellion."

The Hellhound's dark eyes scrutinized me. "Procer?"

"The most likely suspect," I grunted. "You'd think that after their civil war they'd leave the rest of Creation alone for a while, but that's the Principate for you. They're never happy unless they're chewing at someone else's borders."

Juniper ran a pensive hand over the maps still adorning her table. She had surprisingly delicate fingers for an orc, I noticed. Nauk's might as well have been sausages, but my Legate's could almost have passed for a human's if not for the colour.

"We've never fought the Principate except during the Crusades," she said. "We'll have to adjust tactics accordingly, if war breaks out. They don't rely as heavily on cavalry as the Kingdom did."

"I have a set of Theodosius' treatises, if you want to look at it," I told her. "I'm sure they've made adjustments to their doctrine since the League Wars, but the basics should remain similar."

"Hakram has one too," she replied absently. "I'll borrow it."

I raised an eyebrow at that. As my adjutant the other orc had been working closely with the Legate, but I hadn't known they were friendly. I'd never seen Juniper spend her personal time with anyone other than Aisha, actually, though I put no stock in Robber's constant insinuations those two were a couple. The goblin captain wasn't exactly a credible source: he'd once spent the better part of a fortnight composing a ballad about the tragic forbidden love between Nauk and one of the oxen the Fifteenth used as beasts of burden. It had actually been a pretty catchy tune, not that I would ever admit that out loud.

"If we can't kill the rumours, we'll have to be straightforward about it," I spoke, returning to our original topic. "Inform the officers as soon as it's handled."

"I'll take care of it," Juniper grunted. "It might be best if you distance yourself from the matter, Lady Squire."

I rolled my eyes at the sudden return to formality.

"Distancing myself isn't really an option, Juniper," I replied. "That's why you sent Kilian to get me in the first place."

"I meant afterwards," the Hellhound replied. "You're not an officer, my Lady. Warlords don't explain themselves to the ranks. They do what needs to be done, and the Clan falls into line."

Like most orcs, Juniper used the Lower Miezani word 'warlord' regardless of the gender of the person being referred to. The Kharsum word for the same meaning had no gender attached to it, and if she was aware of the inaccuracy she didn't seem to care.

"My Name isn't Warlord, Juniper," I reminded her.

"No, it's Squire," she acknowledged flatly. "A Callowan Squire. If you're seen getting too heavily involved in this, our Praesi legionaries might think you're favouring the Westerners. I don't need to tell you how dangerous that could get."

I grimaced, but did not dispute the point. My Legate had this nasty habit of being right, especially when I didn't want to hear

it. I was spared further discussion of the matter by Hakram returning from the errand I'd sent him on, tramping in with a bottle of wine and three cups. He saluted Juniper absent-mindedly and turned to face me.

"I've got what you asked," he gravelled.

There was a look on his face, like he wanted to say more but was biting his tongue.

"Out with it, Adjutant," I grunted.

"You sure you want to do this, Catherine?" he asked.

Ah, Hakram. I'd thought his objections would be about what would be said when word got out, but as always I underestimated him. That he was worried about me and not the consequences of my actions had me fonder of him than I probably should be.

"Needs to be done," I finally said.

"You don't have to be the one to do it," he retorted.

"It'd be a dangerous habit to get in," I murmured, "asking others to do what I'm not willing to do myself."

That was the thing with villainy, I was starting to understand: every step downhill seemed more reasonable than the last. *If hands have to be bloodied, let them be mine. And if I can't bring myself to do it, then maybe it shouldn't be done at all.* The all orc nodded sharply and dropped the subject, handing me the bottle and cups. My eyes flicked to Juniper and I found her face inscrutable as she studied the both of us. Without another word to either of them, I made my way down the set of stairs leading to the cellar. A pair of Taghreb legionaries flanked the door and one of them fished out the key from the ring on his belt, unlocking the door without needing to be prompted. They saluted as I crossed the threshold, their gaze feeling heavy on my back.

"Well, shit," a voice announced. "They kicked this up the ladder pretty quick."

There were two men inside, crouched next to an empty barrel. One of them was older, a blond-haired and blue-eyed man built like a brawler and sporting a purpling black eye – he'd been the one to speak. The other was shorter and skinnier, brown-haired and dark-eyed. If the angle he was cradling his arm at was any indication, it had been broken pretty brutally. There was a small stool next to the door and I claimed it as my own, leaning my back against the wall.

"Something like that," I agreed, the iron cups clinking as my fingers tightened.

The blond one would be Sergeant Pike, if I remembered Juniper's briefing correctly. The other one had taken the option of adopting a new name when he'd joined the Legions and went by Alban. That he'd chosen the name of the first ruling dynasty of Callow as his own meant he'd either gone through the Imperial orphanages or that his family had been well-off – not just anyone could afford history lessons.

"So, "I mused out loud as the two of them eyes me warily. "Would either of you gentlemen care to explain how you came to hatch a plan so godsdamned *stupid*?"

There was a heartbeat, then Pike laughed.

"Hells, Squire," he replied and I had to force my face to remain friendly at the unwarranted familiarity, "if we were that smart, we wouldn't have ended up here in the first place."

He smiled at me, cheeks dimpling handsomely as he did. He was fairly good-looking, in a Liessen way. Fair hair like his wasn't as common around Laure, though not exactly rare either.

"I didn't mean to stab the orc, ma'am," the other one blurted out suddenly. "It was just, he was growling and I panicked and-"

I raised a hand to interrupt him. Uncorking the bottle with a twist of the wrist, I poured myself a cup and took a sip. Pike's eyes followed me carefully, belying his almost nonchalant pose.

"Wine?" I asked. "It's from Hedges, but it's still better than a parched throat."

"Don't mind if I do," the sergeant replied.

Alban blinked nervously. "Sarge," he spoke with watery eyes. "Should we really-"

Pike slapped him across the face, his expression never changing. "Take the nice lady's wine, Alby," he said flatly. "If we're going to get out of this alive, we need to listen very closely to what she says."

Alban whimpered but took the cup when I handed it to him. So did Pike, though I noticed he only wet his lips until I took a second pull from my own.

"Here's the thing," I spoke. "If you two had tried to pull a runner after we'd crossed the Wasaliti, I would have understood. You might have managed to get lost in the Fields. But here, this deep in the Wasteland? Even if you'd managed to get into Ater, you would have stuck out like a sore thumb."

Two white boys in a city where there couldn't be more than a few hundred expatriated Callowans? They would have been caught the

very day I put out a search order. Ater was big, but it was also full of Praesi who wanted nothing more than to see a few Westerners do the quick drop and the sudden stop.

"Officers would have kept a closer watch when we got close to combat," Pike admitted. "Didn't want to risk it."

I sighed. "The two of you are gallows recruits, I take it?"

"Got into a fight with the city guard in Vale," the sergeant smiled. "Things got a little out of hand."

I hummed and turned my eyes to Alban. The boy shuddered, remaining silent until Pike elbowed him.

"My family's from Denier," the boy stammered. "They were, uh, implicated in a seditious movement."

No wonder they got caught. Denier's garrison was the Fourth Legion, and it was an open secret in Callow that the Imperial Governor was little more than a front for Marshal Ranker: legionaries patrolled openly in the streets in lieu of the city guard. Of the three Marshals the former goblin Matron was the most cunning – planning rebellion in a city where she ruled in all but name was doomed to failure.

"Drink your wine, Alby," Pike told him. "Maybe you'll be able to stop pissing your pants in front of the Squire with a little liquid courage in you."

Alban obeyed. I was becoming more and more inclined to believe the boy's claim that he hadn't meant to stab anyone. He didn't have the spine for real resistance, not that it made any difference. Pike drained the rest of his cup and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his aketon.

"So how bad is it, ma'am?" he asked. "The Hellhound's got to be asking for our heads on a silver platter."

"That depends on whether or not the legionary with the stomach wound survives the night," I replied. "If he doesn't, the usual punishment is being stoned to death."

The brown-haired boy whimpered again, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of contempt for him. Maybe it wasn't fair of me, but he was just so... weak. Just a minion for Pike to push around, lacking any will of his own. And his spinelessness might cost me an actual soldier, one who'd been doing his job. Some of that must have shown on my face, because the fair-haired sergeant took a long look at me and immediately began changing tracks.

"The goblin I cut up is fine though, right?" he asked.

"It was a minor wound," I replied. "He'll have nothing left of it but a scar come morning."

I got what he meant loud and clear – his own actions had been relatively harmless, so he should be spared Alban's fate. I smiled at him. *I'm an actual villain, Sergeant Pike, and I'm not that quick to throw my subordinates under the chariot.* If I'd had any doubts left about people being born in a Good nation being any naturally better than those who weren't, this conversation would have buried them. The fair-haired boy coughed.

"Anyway, we learned our lesson about desertion. Stupid idea, should have just served my term. I know the fucking greenskins will be howling for a meal, but d'you think we could get away with a flogging?"

"I have the ultimate authority over all disciplinary measures in the Fifteenth," I noted. "If tell Juniper to just send you back to your lines, there's nothing she can do about it."

Pike snickered. "Wouldn't that be a sight to see. You probably shouldn't, though," he advised. "If we get off without any punishment the Wastelanders will kick up a fuss." He leaned closer. "I know you have to pretend to give a shit about what they think as long as you run the show. Must be a pain, huh?"

He elbowed Alban again to nudge him into agreeing, but the boy didn't react.

"It's been a little complicated telling right from wrong, since I became a villain," I agreed softly. "The lines in the sand aren't where I left them. I'm too used to seeing anyone from Callow as the good guys and anyone from Praes as the villains."

"That's pretty much how it is, though," Pike frowned. "I mean, there's a few of them who are tolerable – Alby here had this Soninke piece who was making eyes at him, for example. What was her name again?"

Alban did not reply. His eyes were closed. Pike snorted.

"Little shit probably passed out from sheer relief," he told me.

"I'm afraid he's quite dead," I replied calmly. "Make sense he'd go first, he's smaller – the poison won't take as long to act."

My Name blazed through my veins, burning out the rest of the toxin running through my body.

"You-" Pike tried to snarl, but his tongue had gotten numb.

"I'm still soft, I know," I replied quietly. "I asked for something painless when you don't really deserve it. But that

choice wasn't about you, it was about me. I don't want to be the kind of person who inflicts pain when they don't need to."

The sergeant tried to get up but his limbs gave out before he could do more than crawl, falling at my feet as I looked down on him.

"Here's the thing, Sergeant," I said. "I'm not sure what side I'm on. Not of them really fit. But I do know this: whatever side it is, you're not on it."

I got to my feet as the last of life left the man's eyes, brushing off my armour. Had I been fair tonight, I wondered? I'd been within my rights, certainly, but they were rights given to me by the Empire. The laws of the Tower were supremely unconcerned by factors as trivial as morality. I eyed the two corpses for a long moment, then decided it didn't matter. I hadn't forgotten the lesson Heiress taught me, that night on the Blessed Isle.

Justifications only matter to the just.

Heroic Interlude: Balestra

"Seventy-three: always send the comic relief in front if you suspect there's a trap. The Gods won't allow you to be rid of them so easily."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", unknown author

The Wandering Bard was drunk again, and William was very much beginning to miss his days as a solitary freedom fighter. Why the Ashuran had decided that three days into Imperial-held territory was the time to start drinking again was beyond him, but if she tried to grab his ass one more time he wouldn't be held responsible for his actions. How did she even manage to drink so much, anyway? Her knapsack was large enough for five bottles at most, and she was halfway through her twentieth. If she'd managed to find a Bottomless Bag and she was using it for booze instead of something actually useful, William was going to have a fit. An actual bloody fit, with screaming and everything.

"She's surprisingly eloquent, for someone so deep in her cups," the hooded woman next to him remarked.

The Deoraithe observer went by Breagach, which he had a feeling meant something scathingly ironic in the Old Tongue. Still, she was by far the most tolerable member of the band of idiots he'd managed to assemble. It was a shame the Duchess still refused to get into the fight until her conditions were met, but that Breagach had stuck around was a good sign.

"I'd be more enthused if she wasn't using that eloquence to try to get into Hunter's trousers," William replied.

"To be fair," Breagach replied drily, "he has few other clothes to get into."

She wasn't wrong. The Hunter had already proved his worth by helping them avoid the Ninth's wolf riders on two occasions, but that didn't change the fact that the man wore fewer clothes than an exotic dancer. The other Named had shown up in Marchford wearing tight pants and a leather vest that left his pectorals on prominent display, the tribal tattoos adorning his entire body only barely giving out the impressions he wasn't mostly naked. The silver bells and faerie trinkets that were woven into his hair chimed gently whenever he wasn't trying to sneak around, a ridiculous counterpart to the grim-faced stoicism the man tried to display at all times. Tuning out the Bard's horrifying attempts to break into a serenade while holding a bottle of gin in one hand and her lute in the other, William cast his eye on the rest of their company.

The Bumbling Conjuror was fiddling with his belt again, fighting a losing battle in trying to make a strap meant for a man twice his size fit his narrow hips. The Thief was slowly edging in the Conjuror's direction while he was distracted, probably to rifle through his bags again. He wished he could say it was the first time she'd be robbing an ally, but the cheeky brat had been eating her rations on what he was pretty sure was the Duke of Liesse's personal silverware. William cleared his throat and glared at her. She flashed him an unrepentant grin, flipping back her short dark hair and strolling away with her hands in her pockets.

The Lone Swordsman pushed down a sigh for what seemed to be the hundredth time. He had a suspicion that the nature of his Role made interacting with others heroes even more irritating. In some ways he'd been lucky to manage to find four other Named for what he had planned – five was the best pattern, for heroic enterprises – but keeping them on track was like trying to herd a gang of cats, at least half of which were assholes. The only saving grace was that the sixty soldiers Countess Marchford had granted him were as professional as it got, all of them former Royal Guard she'd taken into her service after the Conquest. Like him, they were itching to get into Summerholm and strike a blow for the Kingdom. Shapes were moving about in the dark up ahead, close to the Hwaerte's bank, and his hand drifted towards the Penitent's Blade. Breagach shook her head.

"Our scouts are returning," she said.

William decided not to ask how she could see so well in the dark when even his Name-vision could not. He had a feeling she was a member of the Watch, or at least had been trained by it, and

everybody knew the Watchers of the March had ancient sorcerous tricks up their sleeves. The five soldiers who'd gone ahead trickled back into their makeshift camp, the officer among them heading straight for him.

"Lieutenant Hawkins," William greeted him.

"Sir," the man replied, obviously resisting the habit to salute. "We have a problem."

"My life is a series of problems, Lieutenant," the Swordsman replied, more honestly than was strictly warranted. Breagach snorted. "What's the situation?"

The older man coughed. "There's an Imperial patrol headed our way."

William's eyes sharpened. "How many?"

"Just a single line," the man replied. "We're close enough to Summerholm they've lowered the numbers."

The hero's fingers closed against the handle of his sword, feeling its hunger wake. To think there'd been a time where he'd thought that using a blade of legend was a privilege instead of a burden.

"Could we go around it?" he asked.

"They don't have goblins along, so it's possible," Hawkins admitted. "But it'd be risky, sir."

The soldier glanced sideways at the Bard, who was currently trying to find a rhyme for 'butt cheeks' and cheerfully failing.

"We're not the most... quiet group, with all due respect," the lieutenant finished.

"Very politely put," Breagach murmured.

William grunted in dismay. "Get the men ready," he told Hawkins. "We're taking them out."

The lieutenant nodded, his hand twitching in a repressed salute once again before he marched away.

"General Afolabi will notice that one of his patrols went missing," the Deoraihe said after Hawkins got out of earshot. "You took him by surprise at Marchford, but he is far from incompetent."

None of the fucking generals were incompetent, that was the worst part about fighting the Empire. Countess Elizabeth has been stalemating with General Sacker when he'd left, which was why it

was so important they struck true in Summerholm. With that bitch Heiress coming out of nowhere with her mercenary army to take Dormer, the rebellion was losing momentum.

"As long as we manage to make it to the city fast enough, there shouldn't be a problem," he grunted. "Thief has a way in, it's why she's here."

"I did wonder why you had her along," Breagach admitted. "She's yet to contribute much of worth to this enterprise."

"She'll pull her weight when we get to Summerholm," William replied.

Hopefully. Otherwise he'd just taken on a massive pain in his ass for no valid reason. The conversation was cut short when it became obvious their soldiers were ready to move out. The Lone Swordsman wasted no time telling the other Named to get in gear, simply glaring silently at them until they were uncomfortable enough to fall in line. Their scouts were nothing if not competent and the Bumbling Conjuror somehow managed not to set himself on fire, so they managed to steal a march on the enemy. After a soft-spoken conference with Hawkins, William agreed to split their party in three to better surround the legionaries: allowing even one of them to get away could ruin this entire enterprise.

The dark-haired hero reluctantly allowed the Thief to join another group, deciding that the Bard was the liability he needed to keep an eye on. Breagach remained with him as he hid with his twenty soldiers in the tall grass, no one even bothering to try to tell her what to do. She'd already made it perfectly clear that she did not consider herself under the authority of anyone here. The moonlight had yet to reveal the orcs, but if he closed his eyes William could hear them. They were still a way off, but at the pace he estimated they were walking he wouldn't have to wait too long on them.

"That's a nice sword you've got," the Bard crawling up to his side.

William twitched. "I've already told you, I'm not interested in—"

"I didn't mean *that* sword, sweetcheeks," she chuckled, then raised an eyebrow. "Unless..."

"No," the Swordsman retorted through gritted teeth.

"Shame," the Bard sighed. "Decent way to get the tension out before a fight. But back to that mighty sword of yours. I can feel the enchantments on it from where I'm standing. Old stuff. Powerful stuff. Does it have a name?"

He eyed the other hero carefully. "The Penitent's Blade," he replied, not finding a reason to deny her the information besides her general existence being an irritant.

She let out a quiet whistle. "Now that's interesting. Subtler than I would have thought, too. Not 'a blade that inflicts penitence' but 'the blade of a penitent'."

She hummed, dark eyes set in a darker face smiling under her lazily closed pupils.

"Someone's been a very bad boy," she murmured. "Not as squeaky clean as you look, are you?"

"That's got nothing to do with you," William replied harshly.

"It's important for a bard to know what kind of story she's in," the Ashuran denied with an indolent smile. "See, normally I would have pegged you for being aligned with the Choir of Judgement, but there's never more than one of those at a time. Thought you might be with the Choir of Fortitude instead, but I read you all wrong didn't I? No, you're aligned with the Choir of Contrition."

"And why would you care?" the Swordsman replied.

"I don't usually sing songs about boys and girl who shook hands with Contrition," the Bard told him softly. "I know half a dozen, of course, but I never liked singing tragedies."

"This isn't a story, Bard," William grunted.

"It's all a story, Lone Swordsman," the Ashuran replied with a mirthless smile. "And I don't know of any one where a young boy cutting up people with a piece from a Hashmallim's wing ends well for the boy in question."

The Swordsman stilled, blood running cold. How could she *know*? There were some who knew of the Choirs, and it made sense a Name that ran so heavily on lore would know of it, but had she seen one of the angels? The green-eyed hero watched the Bard's face carefully, then decided against it. No one who'd seen what he'd seen could ever remain so carefree. Gods, what he remembered from that night... *Fire, brilliant fire. A light that sears deeper than darkness ever could.* The House of Light had taught him that angels were beautiful beyond human ability to comprehend, but they had never said that beauty would be a terrible thing. It had changed him, bearing the full of a Hashmallim's presence. Taught him the true price of atonement.

"You're drunk," William replied dismissively, hoping it was enough to end this conversation. "You should lay off the bottle for a while."

The Bard chuckled "How can I, sweet thing, when there's just so much to drink about?"

"The orcs are here," Breagach whispered, and the Swordsman nearly jumped out of his own skin.

Shit, how long had the Deoraithe been there? He hadn't heard her get close at all. He cast a wary look at her but the hooded woman was looking ahead, where the twenty legionaries were slowly making their way down a slope. Regulars, by the look of their armour. Heavies and sappers were only rarely sent on patrols.

"The other groups should have them surrounded by now," William spoke.

The Hunter and the Conjuror would have the back, the Thief and Lieutenant Hawkins the side. With the Swordsman's own group in front of them, their only way out led straight into the river. The officer in charge of the enemy line suddenly called a halt, and spat out curses in their disgusting excuse for a language.

"They saw one of us," the Bard voiced. "Too late, though."

William was inclined to agree. The legionaries slowly formed a square as his own soldiers emerged from cover, pulling the noose tight. The green-eyed hero got to his feet and his men followed suit, carefully moving forward. The enemy lieutenant called out something in orcish and her legionaries replied with a few scattered laughs before slamming their shields into the ground. Voice echoing as one, they started calling words out in the same tongue.

"Breagach," William asked urgently. "What are they casting?"

The Deoraithe shook her head as the enemy slammed their shields again, the bang punctuating the end of a sentence.

"Not casting," she murmured. "Singing. That's the Chant of the Dead."

Curiosity lit up the Bard's eyes. "Never heard that one before," she admitted "What are they saying?"

The hooded woman cocked her head to the side, then spoke in cadence.

"We,

Broken spears

Shattered shields

Come to die."

The shields hit the ground in a thunderclap.

"We,

Remnant lost

Forlorn hope

Come to die."

Like a hammer on the anvil, the shields rang.

"We,

Carrion-feeders

Grave-fillers

Come to die."

The shields came down one last time and Breagach translated the last verse almost solemnly.

"We,

Ruin-children

Stand ready

Come to die."

A shiver went up the hero's spine. "You're sure it's not a spell?" he asked again.

"The Duchy has records of them doing this before," Breagach replied. "It's what their warriors sing when they know they're not coming back from a battle." The Deoraithe sighed. "Beautiful tongue, Kharsum. Well-suited to poetry."

"Wolves howl at the moon," William replied sharply. "That does not detract from the necessity of putting them down."

Breagach half-turned in his direction, features hidden by the shadows of her hood. She did not reply. Indifferent to her opinion, the Lone Swordsman unsheathed his sword.

"FORWARD!" he called out.

His Name surged through his veins, singing a song of carnage. *This* was what he meant for, not shadow games and politics. Him and his blade against the Creation, setting it right one corpse at a time. He sped ahead of the soldiers, feet carrying him at a swiftness beyond mere mortals until he impacted with the legionary shield wall. The orc facing him grunted at the blow and stabbed low but William sneered and spun around him, slipping

into the enemy's formation. Casually, the Penitent's Blade keened as it tore through the greenskin's throat. Blood spilled over the ground but William had already moved on, kicking down another monster to widen the opening in their formation.

The officer moved towards him, roaring a challenge, but he spat in the creature's face and his sword cleaved through her shield effortlessly. She cursed and tried to swing her blade but it was much, much too late. A flick of the wrist sent her head tumbling to the ground, the blood spray drenching him in crimson as he smiled. His soldiers hit the enemy line a moment later, forcing it in tight vice. The orcs were pushed back towards him like meat into a grinder, his blade scything through the screaming monsters as they fought and died like dogs. Red steam started rising from his armour as a white glow took hold of it, his movements quickening as he whirled among the Empire's footsoldiers and claimed the lives that were the Kingdom's due.

The orcs did not break, but it mattered little.

The last of them died to the Thief, the dark-haired woman carelessly slipping a knife in the monster's throat in a flash of silver before stepping away to leave the body to fall. Silence reigned over the battlefield as William stood in the centre of a ring of corpses, the grisly monument to his skill unfolding like the petals of a bloody flower. The Penitent's Blade pulsed under his grip, keeping time with his heartbeats. Yes, he thought, *this will do*. He could not deny it had felt viciously satisfying to take out his frustrations on targets so thoroughly deserving of it.

"See to the wounded, pack your gear," he ordered the others. "We move out immediately."

They had work ahead of them. To Summerholm they would go. In the enemy's own fortress, where the Empire hid behind walls they had stolen to feel safe. And when they got there? They were going to break a legend.

They were going to kill a Calamity.

Chapter 4: Return

"Home is wherever you can order someone drowned and not get any odd looks."

-Dread Emperor Malignant III

He'd found a spot ringed by bushes a little off the road. It must have been used by travellers: there were still ashes from the last time someone had lit a fire. Gathering wood was a little

trickier than usual since he had his mother's sword instead of a hatchet, but he'd managed without cutting off any of his limbs. No bedroll for him, though his cloak was thick enough it would serve just as well – it wouldn't be his first time sleeping out in the wild. He wasn't close enough to the Wasteland for the things that roamed the night out there to be an issue, thank the Gods Below. There was a rustle in the bushes ahead and the green-eyed boy's hand dropped to his sword. Fate was ever fond of its little ironies. Still, bandits this close to Satus? Unusual. He'd heard the freeholder militia kept the land safe, or at least as safe as land could get in the Empire. After a moment a dark-skinned boy around his age emerged from the greens, looking a little harried.

"Good evening," the stranger said.

His voice was deep and smooth, the kind you could listen to for hours even if the conversation was boring. Amadeus' fingers relaxed against the hilt of the sword but did not leave it entirely. No point in taking any stupid risks.

"Evening," he replied cautiously.

"I ask for the shelter of your fire, traveller," the other boy said, tone ceremonial.

"Granted," Amadeus answered, keeping his relief off his face.

He was familiar with the Taghreb custom: the stranger had just agreed there would be no violence between them until dawn. The other boy's skin was too dark for him to be one of the desert-dwellers, but at the moment he wasn't inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Oh thank the Gods," the other traveler said, running a hand through his short black hair. "I was beginning to think I'd have to roll up under a tree for the night."

Amadeus raised an eyebrow.

"You don't know how to make a fire?"

The other boy flashed him a grin, white teeth gleaming in the fire's light.

"Not the sort you use in a camp," he replied, licks of blue flame wreathing his hand for a moment before dissipating into nothingness.

"Useful trick," the green-eyed boy said. "Mage?"

The stranger nodded.

"I go by Apprentice. You?"

The dream stayed with me long after I woke.

A warning or an introduction? If I wasn't mistaken the boy who'd come out of the bushes had been Warlock, long before he claimed his current Name. The vision had been shorter than the glimpses I usually got and, well, arguably not as important. The dreams I'd dreamt before had always been turning points in Black's life, lessons he learned or taught. *Unless this was a turning point.* There was no denying that without a mage of the Warlock's calibre on his side much of what Black had accomplished would have been beyond his reach. Ultimately, I sighed and put the whole thing aside. The meaning would become clear in due time, I imagined.

We were halfway through the month of Taj by the time the Fifteenth got to Summerholm. There'd never been any question of our being accommodated inside the city-fortress: what remained of the Twelfth took up all the available space and then some. Some citizens had apparently been forced to quarter soldiers and I could just imagine how well *that* had gone over. It hadn't even been a year since the hangings, after all, and no one held grudges quite like Callowans. My legion would need to trickle through the city and settle in one of the now-abandoned camps on the western bank. I'd elected to enter Summerholm ahead of the ranks, fully expecting I'd meet with General Afolabi at some point. My weekly scrying sessions with Black had me mostly up to date on the state of the war but I'd be better to have the perspective of someone with boots on the ground. How friendly the general would actually be was still unknown, though. Afolabi Magoro was old Soninke nobility, and though I doubted anyone so high up the food chain would be affiliated with the Truebloods, being a racist asshole didn't exactly disqualify people from command in the Legions. That he'd lost almost a quarter of the Twelfth to the rebels when they rose up in Marchford wasn't doing much to inspire hope in that regard.

I reined up Zombie ahead of the bridge, more for show than anything else. The undead horse responded to my will, not actual physical stimulus. Squinting ahead to see who Nauk had picked for my escort yielded a pleasant surprise: Nilin was patiently waiting a little further ahead, flanked by a pair of lines from his cohort. That Nauk had sent his Senior Tribune to escort me was a little surprising given how heavily I knew the orc relied on the man's organisational skills, but I supposed he'd decided to keep my safety in the family, so to speak. While I'd been careful not to show outright favouritism, there was no denying I was a lot closer to the officers who'd followed me into the Fifteenth from Rat Company. The calm-eyed Soninke saluted when I trotted Zombie up to him – if he was uncomfortable at standing so close to a necromantic construct, there was no trace of it on his face. *Then again, Praesi don't really get worked up about necromancy.* That made sense, in a way: more often than not, if there were undead on the field they'd be on the Empire's side.

"Lady Squire," Nilin greeted me.

"Tribune," I replied a tad drily.

I'd already made my opinion of formality between us perfectly clear, and though he acceded to my wishes whenever we went for drinks he defaulted to titles whenever we were in public. The dark-skinned man rolled his eyes at the unspoken dig.

"Are you ready to enter the city?" he asked.

"Juniper's already handling the marching orders," I shrugged. "Might as well bite the blade and get the politics over with."

Nilin nodded and whistled sharply. The lines fell behind us in good order, the Tribune himself keeping pace with my horse's gait with little effort. I cast a pensive look at the legionaries following us, idly rubbing a thumb against the hilt of my sword. Soon I'd need to assemble a retinue of my own, my personal equivalent to my teacher's Blackguards. I'd been given no limit on the size of it, though given that I'd have to feed and equip them from my own pocket I'd have to keep it manageable. I was currently getting paid the equivalent of a general's salary, an income that made the savings I'd brought from Callow with me laughable in comparison. By Laurean standards I had the means of a merchant from the upper crust, though I still fell way short of most landed nobles. I'd have to be careful who I took in, though. My retinue would serve to handle the matters I couldn't pursue through the Fifteenth as well as my personal security, which made me reluctant to involve Praesi. *Not an urgent matter yet*, I decided. While I'd been lost in my own thoughts Nilin had apparently turned his attention to the bridge we were crossing, seemingly fascinated with the construction.

"I'm not seeing much here but stone," I told him, shaking him out of his own introspection.

The dark-skinned man cleared his throat, mildly embarrassed. "I have something of an interest in architecture," he admitted. "The way Callowans adapted Miezan engineering is completely different than ours – the style is purely local, but the underlying principles are the same."

I cocked my head to the side. "A good bridge, then?"

"It won't last as long as the structures on the Blessed Isle, but I'd consider it vastly superior to anything else in Callow. Or even some parts of Praes, to be honest."

I filed that away for further reference, though I was more interested in this previously-unseen aspect of the tribune.

"I hadn't pegged you for the scholarly type," I informed him.

The Soninke shrugged. "I was on the Imperial ticket before the War College," he replied. "I considered taking the sapper classes before falling in with Nauk, but the command track had better career prospects."

I blinked in surprise. "You attended one of the Imperial schools? I think you're the first student from there I met. I honestly still have a hard time believing the Tower funds free education."

Nilin chuckled, the sound halfway between bitter and amused.

"Free is a bit of a stretch, Lady Squire," he told me. "Students might not need to pay in gold, but we are bound to serve the Tower for time equivalent to the span of our education – either as public servants or soldiers."

I grimaced. That *did* sound a little more like the Empire I knew. "So how'd you end up in the College from there?" I asked. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're under my command but the War College isn't exactly a scholarly institution."

"I placed among the first five students of my year, so I was offered a full scholarship for the College," Nilin explained. "Not where I thought I'd end up, but it beat ending up as a tax collector in Callow."

"I'm sure you would have been a splendidly efficient tax collector," I replied loyally, though I couldn't quite hide the twitch of my lips.

"No doubt," the Soninke replied dryly. "Still, it would have been a shame to miss all this excitement. Nauk's been rather eager to sink his teeth into a real battle and I must admit the enthusiasm is contagious."

I raised an eyebrow: neither his face nor his tone had been in any way affected by this supposed enthusiasm, though I supposed that was kind of Nilin's way. When the Rat Company veterans went drinking, he was the only one who never got rowdy when drunk – the most affected I'd ever seen him was when he'd spent half a bell lecturing Robber on why it was exceedingly rude to insinuate people from Wolof still practiced mass sacrifice in the Maze of Kilns. We spent the rest of the walk across the bridge in idle chit chat, a pleasant distraction from what lay ahead of me. Still, soon enough we arrived at the gates. The tall bronze-forged doors were wide open and it seemed like General Afolabi had been expecting me. A line of legionaries was waiting by the sentries, standing ramrod straight now that I'd come into view. The officer among them came forward and I was pleasantly surprised to note she was a Senior Tribune: Afolabi could have gotten away with sending me someone lower in rank as a greeter. That he'd bothered sending someone that high-ranking was a good sign.

"Ma'am," the woman welcomed me with a sharp salute. "Welcome to Summerholm. The General sends his compliments on making such good time."

"Very kind of him," I replied easily. "Your name, soldier?"

"Senior Tribune Fadia," she introduced herself. "I'm to be your escort in the city."

I raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware the situation in Summerholm warranted an additional line to complement my own guard."

The Senior Tribune's lips thinned. "I've been instructed to answer all your questions until the general can meet you," she replied. "But, if I may, this is not the kind of conversation that should be had in the open. Rooms have been made available to you in the Comital Palace for rest and refreshments."

Very cagey, I decided. But not disrespectful, so there was no need to burn goodwill by pressing the matter here. What exactly was going on in Summerholm? The city was far enough away from the frontlines of the Liesse Rebellion that there shouldn't be any risk of assault. Not to mention that attacking a place as heavily fortified as this one would be bald idiocy. Was this relating to Warlock? The Calamity was, as far as I knew, still in the city.

"Lead on, then, Senior Tribune," I finally replied.

One of these days, I was going to manage a Summerholm visit where nobody tried to kill me. *But odds are it isn't going to be this one.*

—

The Comital Palace was remarkably austere, compared to its equivalent in Laure.

It wasn't an entirely unexpected development. The Counts of Summerholm had always been the martial sorts, even back when they'd ruled a petty kingdom of their own before the founding of Callow. The room I'd been given was smaller than the one Black had set aside for me in his own Ater estate but it was comfortable nonetheless: the furniture was expensive imported Liessen wood and freshly polished. The tapestries adorning the walls depicted hunts or battles, and if the amount of Imperial defeats showing was any indication nobody had bothered to change them since the Conquest. A carafe of cooled wine was waiting for me on the antechamber's table when I entered, flanked by a pair of glasses. It was a little early in the day to start drinking, but the sun had been out in force and I'd worked up a thirst — I poured myself a glass and offered the same to Nilin, though my minion declined. Senior Tribune Fadia stood uncomfortably as I

claimed a seat with a little sigh of pleasure, my own Senior Tribune coming to stand at my right like an unflappable gargoyle.

"The information I'm about to share is considered restricted," Fadia spoke, too polite to outright say she'd like me to send Nilin out of the room.

Well bully for her, because he wasn't going anywhere. I'd already made as much of a concession as I intended to make by keeping my legionaries out in the corridors.

"I wouldn't have brought Senior Tribune Nilin at all if I didn't trust him," I replied flatly. "Now what exactly is going on here, soldier? My patience is running thin."

The woman cleared her throat. "We have reason to suspect there are heroes in the city."

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my seat, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "Of course that fucker decided to make an appearance," I complained. "Clearly, the situation wasn't volatile enough already – and wait, did you say *heroes*?"

It'd taken me a moment to notice the plural.

"Our assessment is at least two," Fadia said. "Likely more."

"Whatever happened to the *Lone* in Lone Swordsman?" I griped. "This is unacceptable. Do you see Black prancing about in white robes? It's called a Name, not a Suggestion."

The woman made a noncommittal noise, face blank and eyes just a little too wide.

"The Lady Squire isn't one to blame the messenger, Senior Tribune," Nilin spoke calmly. "There is no need to fear for your life."

Fadia let out a ragged breath. Huh. Had that been why she'd been so nervous around me? I supposed I could see where she was coming from. For all that my teacher and his associates were the practical sorts, they were just the latest generation in a long tradition of villainy. I'd read enough about past Tyrants to know that killing the bearers of bad news had been one of the milder vices they'd displayed. I'd have to go a long way to ever top forcing a High Lord to build an alligator pit at their own expense just to push them into it.

"Has the general been able to identify any of the heroes?" I asked.

The Senior Tribune nodded. "We know a Thief is currently active in the city. A recent theft fits the pattern she displayed when she was last in Summerholm."

I cocked my head to the side. "What did she steal?"

"Keys," Fadia replied. "Several sets, most of them giving access to military infrastructure."

I frowned. "I have a hard time believing a Thief would need keys to – *ah*. There's enough of them they expect to be operating at multiple places simultaneously."

"That is General Afolabi's conclusion as well," she nodded. "Lord Warlock has set up defensive wards over key positions, but he's informed us that they have counter-measures blocking his scrying."

"Then they have either a priest or a mage of some talent," Nilin contributed quietly. "This is not a probe, they're here for a specific reason."

I frowned. Had my old buddy the Swordsman come to settle our disagreement? It would be a break in pattern for him to gather other heroes just for the purpose of taking me out. How much help they'd be was debatable, anyway: in the end, it would come down to the two of us. *Unless he's trying to kill me on our second encounter.* That seemed... unusually flexible of him, though. I wasn't buying it.

"How is order in the city?" I asked the Senior Tribune.

The woman smiled thinly. "There was some rioting after the Hanging at Marchford, but things quieted down when Lord Warlock entered the city. There's been no widespread resistance since, but we've been losing men for the last few fortnights."

"Patrols are getting hit?" I asked.

"Assassinations," Fadia corrected quietly. "Every morning we find an officer carved up in the streets."

I hissed out a curse in Kharsum. "They're *torturing* soldiers?"

"Someone's taking a knife to their face to cut up a message," she admitted. "It's always the same words."

I stared her down until she continued.

"*No truce with the Enemy,*" she quoted. She hesitated a moment before continuing. "Our healers say that the wound pattern means they're still alive when the message is carved."

Well, shit. That wasn't even anti-hero behaviour, it was downright villainous. The Lone Swordsman had always had that gritty edge to him, but this was... *And we know whose fault this is, don't we Catherine? Turns out letting angry vicious heroes loose on Creation can have consequences. Who would have thought?*

Fuck, I might as well have wielded the knife myself. *You can have a self-flagellation session later*, I told myself. *Business first.*

"How many people know?" I asked tiredly.

"The first corpse was found in the Court of Swords," the Senior Tribune grimaced. "The whole *city* knows."

I resisted the urge to curse again. So much for keeping a lid on this.

"And you say there's been no resistance?" I repeated in a sceptical tone.

"Nothing open, if anything that's more worrying," the woman said. "Ma'am, Summerholm is a boiling pot about to tip over. If things continue like this, the general thinks we'll be facing a full-scale uprising before the end of the month."

I grit my teeth. "And what has the Warlock been doing about this?"

"Besides the wards? Nothing. He's been holed up in the western bastion with his son since he arrived," Fadia replied with poorly-masked resentment. "Requests for his intervention have been systematically ignored."

What the Hells is going on here? I wondered. The man was a Calamity, he'd been part of the crew to conquer Callow in the first place. Why wasn't he stepping in before things got out of control? Weeping Heavens, why wasn't Black ordering him to intervene? I knew for a fact they were in contact. Some part of me was wondering whether this was another test, but I'd gotten to know my teacher better than that – he wouldn't allow a situation like this to fester without a damned good reason, and seeing whether or not I had it in me to put down rioting Callowans hardly qualified. It would be... wasteful, and Black was anything but.

"Nilin," I spoke up. "Send a runner to Juniper. We're walking into a shed full of sharpers, and someone just stole a matchbox."

The Soninke nodded and made for the corridor to see it done. I returned my attention to the other Senior Tribune, forcing my face into a mask of equanimity.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"General Afolabi invites you and your senior officers to sup with him tonight," she replied. "Lord Warlock has asked that you come see him as soon as feasible."

I smiled sharply. "That's nice. I need to have a good, long talk with the man anyway."

Fadia looked mildly embarrassed, then cleared her throat again. "The general has also respectfully requested that, uh, you not bring goblinfire stocks within city limits."

I closed my eyes and let out a deep sigh, ignoring the choking noise that was Nilin trying not to laugh. "That won't be a problem," I replied, getting up to my feet.

Time to find Hakram: I had a few questions to ask the Sovereign of the Red Skies, and he'd better have some good godsdamned answers.

—

"Morale has hit the bottom of the barrel," Hakram informed me as we made our way to the western bastion. "The Legions weren't designed to suppress civilian unrest and it's been showing."

I grunted in agreement. There was a reason the Empire had kept most of the Kingdom's civilian infrastructure intact after the Conquest. Putting aside how the dismantling of major Callowan institutions would have been a headache and a half to implement, the Legions of Terror were not a peacekeeping organisation. Legionaries were trained to solve their problems through efficient application of violence, but putting all malcontents to the noose would just have been adding fuel to the fire. *And the Empire wants very, very badly to avoid being in a position where they have to stamp down open flames.* I wondered if Black had lost credibility when the Liesse Rebellion had broken out: he had, after all, been the closest thing Callow had to a ruler in the last twenty years. Imperial Governors were ultimately answerable only to the Tower, but as Malicia's mandated right hand my teacher had been straight above them in the pecking order. Or would this reflect badly on the Empress?

"What's the word on General Afolabi?" I asked, deciding to table the train of thought for the moment.

I'd bring it up to Aisha later: she was the closest thing to a political adviser I had in the Fifteenth. Hakram hummed thoughtfully, gathering his thought before he answered my question. My adjutant had spent the last half-bell mingling with the rank and file of the Twelfth Legion, getting an idea of where their mind set was at. That I hadn't even needed to ask him to do it was yet another mark in the orc's favour: Hakram had a way of putting the finger on problems before I even noticed they existed and setting out to fix them.

"They haven't lost faith in him, not exactly," the orc replied. "He wasn't in command at Marchford and nobody expects him to be able to deal with heroes on his own. But this is the second bloody nose the Twelfth has gotten in two months, and they need to blame *someone*."

I grimaced. So in bad position but not yet desperate. I'd have to take care of the situation before it ever got to that part: I had no intention whatsoever of allowing legionaries to put down riots by the sword. The whole reason I'd become the Squire in the first place was to stop the likes of this, and I couldn't quite ignore the guilty itch in the back of my head that whispered I was directly responsible for this mess in the first place. Besides, a civilian massacre would have consequences in the rest of Callow. The centre and the north were still under control but if the Empire starting killing people in the streets, unrest would flare up.

Nothing exists in a vacuum, Catherine, Black's voice reminded me. Not Names, not thrones, not armies. Pull the thread and something will always give.

"And the Imperial Governor?" I wondered. "I'd expected to get a message from them by now."

Hakram snorted. "That'd be quite the feat. The man's dead – he bought it in the first batch of assassinations. Summerholm's been under martial law since."

"I'm starting to think the Swordsman has a fetish for killing those," I grunted in displeasure. "That's two he got rid of in the span of a year."

"Different folk, different strokes," Hakram mused and I snorted.

Before the conversation could further get off track we arrived at the bastion's entrance, such as it was. The squat tower in front of us was one of the several that dotted the outer ring of the city, overlooking the streets under it with a wide top designed to accommodate bowmen and siege engines. Should an army manage to make it past the outer walls, Summerholm had been built to bleed them dry. A handful of legionaries stood in the alcoves flanking the gates to the bastion itself, but there was no sign of any Legion activity up above. Had the Calamity claimed an entire defensive structure for himself? I laid a hand on the wooden doors but immediately drew it back.

"Catherine?" Hakram asked.

"Magic," I replied. "Powerful stuff."

"Lord Warlock has been said to have put wards out in the city," the orc noted. "It would have been stranger if there *wasn't* one over his lodgings."

"That's not a defensive ward," I spoke with a frown. "I know what those feel like, Black taught me to recognize them. This is... weird. Like the entire bastion is some sort of spell."

"Is it harmful?" my adjutant questioned.

"I don't think so," I admitted after a heartbeat. "It feels prickly when there's an active pattern. This is passive, if anything."

Whatever it was, it was also kept working by a gargantuan amount of power. Maybe not as large as the old sorcery laid in the Tower's stones, but much larger than anything else I'd seen. Taking a deep breath, I pushed the doors open and stepped through the threshold. I felt something wash over my skin, but nothing else happened. I cast a look around only to see that the ground floor was empty. It was supposed to serve as a common room, but besides benches and tables there was nothing of note. Ignoring the uneasy feeling settling in my stomach I pressed forward to the stairs in the back of the room, Hakram following suit in silence. The second floor served as guard quarters but I didn't stick around to explore: there was a glow filtering through the stairs leading to the third floor. *Would it have killed you to send someone to greet us instead of letting us wander through the creepy empty bastion?*

The creepiness got pushed up a rung up the ladder when we set foot on the last floor. The stone here was completely different than anything else in the bastion, veined with blue that seemed to shift around if you looked too long at it. More than that, the floor was larger than it had any business being: the parlour where we stood alone was as wide as the bastion had looked from the outside and there were corridors leading away. Across from us a pair of large tinted glass windows allowed a glimpse into what seemed to be a workshop, and I could hear people talking through the closed door. The voices suddenly rose in volume and I stepped closer to the glass.

"- got out again!"

I barely managed to raise my shield before the glass exploded.

Chapter 5: Recognition

"The essence of sorcery is blasphemy. Through will and power, every mage usurps dominion over the laws of Creation from the gods Above and Below."

– Extract from "The Most Noble Art of Magic", by Dread Emperor Sorcerous

Hakram's sword swung clear of its scabbard, joined by mine a heartbeat later.

What had the godsdamned Warlock let loose? Hopefully it was just a devil, because if the mages had managed to bring a demon through this was going to get unpleasant. Barrelling through the

window a burly shape landed a few feet in front of me, shaking off shards of glass. Dark eyes glared at me balefully and the pig let out a plaintive oink, flapping its dainty little wings.

"What," I asked, ever the soul of wit.

"Masego," a man's voice thundered. "Get that thing back in its cage and fireproof the locks this time."

"*What*," I repeated, watching in horror as the pig opened a maw filled with teeth and turned towards me.

I barely had time to curse and huddle behind my heater shield before the thing belched out a stream of flame. I heard Hakram duck away from the danger, flipping over a table as he did, but my instincts had not been so evasive. Heat and the reek of brimstone licked the edges of my shield – I wasn't singed, but it was enough to make me think I should perhaps reconsider my habit of not wearing a helmet outside of the battlefield. The flames guttered out after a moment and I moved forward. Of all the perils I'd anticipated when making my way to the bastion, I had to admit that a fire-breathing winged pig hadn't been one of them. What was the point of the bloody wings, anyway? They were way too small to allow the creature to actually fly.

Oh Gods, am I really at a place in my life where I'm going to actually duel a jail-breaking pig? Before I could test exactly how hard the thing's hide was, the door to the workshop burst open and a man hissed out an incantation, throwing his hand towards the pig: a muzzle of ice formed itself around the creature's mouth and it let out a muted squeal of panic. It tried to make a run for it but the ice spread in slender but solid lines across its body, restraining its feet in solid manacles that stopped it within moments. The little abomination wiggled impotently in front of me, its wings still beating in panic but seemingly incapable of raising its own weight. The man sighed.

"Of course the little bastard gets out just before we get company," he complained. "You'd be Lady Squire, I take it?"

I nodded slowly, sheathing my sword after a moment. The stranger was tall, even for a Soninke, but where I'd become used to rubbing shoulders with soldiers thick with corded muscle this one was built like a scholar. His hair was long and split in a dozen braids threaded with trinkets of silver and precious stones, many reflecting light in unnatural ways. The grey robes he was decked in went all the way to his ankles, covered with a leather apron whose pockets were filled with tools I didn't recognize. The man – boy, I corrected mentally, as for all his height he couldn't have been more than a year older than me – was rather plain, for a Named. Thick eyebrows and dark brown eyes were half-hidden by a pair of spectacles, his lips were fleshy and from the looks of it he bit them often. *Though I suppose after Malicia most everyone*

looks plain. I managed to get my thoughts in order before the silence became awkward.

"That's me," I agreed. "And you'd be..."

I let the sentence dangle, unsure as to what the protocol was here. I'd heard his father call out what I assumed was his name, but I'd been taught that it could be rude to refer to an individual with a Role by anything but their Name without being invited to do so.

"Apprentice," the boy introduced himself with a half-smile. "But you can call me Masego."

"Catherine," I replied easily. "And supervising that poor table behind me is Adjutant Hakram of the Fifteenth."

Apprentice nodded in my officer's direction, then frowned. He pushed up his spectacles and stared at the orc for a long moment.

"Huh," he spoke thoughtfully.

I raised an eyebrow. "Is there a problem?"

"Adjutant," the Soninke muttered. "That's a new one."

I blinked. "The rank's been around for a while, actually," I replied slowly.

"Probably," Apprentice shrugged. "I have, however, never heard of it turning into a Name before."

What? I turned to glance at Hakram, who seemed just as surprised as I was.

"I'm an orc, sir," my officer spoke carefully. "We don't really do the Name thing."

Masego clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth in disapproval.

"Inaccurate," he chided Hakram. "Names were fairly common in the Steppes before the Miezani occupation."

"That's the better part of two thousand years ago," I replied flatly.

The Apprentice seemed utterly indifferent to that fact, much to my irritation.

"It's still nascent in form," the Soninke noted. "If it makes you feel any better, you might get yourself killed before it turns into anything concrete."

It was becoming apparent that social skills were not one of Masego's no doubt plentiful talents. Still, this had *implications*. I'd never heard of an Adjutant before and that was a little worrying, but there was also the fact that for the first time in a millennia and a half a greenskin was coming into a Role. That was... shit, the political ramifications of this alone went way above my head. Black always said that Names were a reflection of the people they sprang from: was something changing with the orcs, or was this about my own burgeoning influence? *This is about the Reforms, has to be*. But why was the Role appearing here and now instead of forty years ago, when they'd first been implemented? Gods, this was going to be such a headache. I cast another look at Hakram and he seemed more troubled than elated at the news. Evidently I wasn't the only realizing how much of a mess this could turn into.

"I'll look into it," I reassured him. "We'll figure this out."

The tall orc nodded, carefully. I was about to ask Masego how he even knew this when the voice from the workshop broke in again.

"Masego," the Warlock called out. "Is the specimen secure?"

The Apprentice eyed the pig and sighed. "It's not going anywhere, Father."

"Then get it back in its cage," the Warlock ordered peevishly. "And bring our guests in, we're not savages."

Masego muttered a few syllables under his breath, gestured peremptorily with his hand and the pig rose in the air. It managed to drift a few feet towards the corridor by beating its wings but before it could escape it was yanked towards the workshop by an unseen force, squealing in dismay all the while.

"I have to ask," I spoke as we made our way to the back. "What the Hells is going on with that pig?"

Apprentice's eyes lit up with enthusiasm. "We're attempting to determine whether Demiurgian phenomena are caused by an original or a creational law. So far it seems to be original, but we'll need to repeat the experiment with greater drift separation."

"I see," I lied. "So the wings and the fire?"

I left the sentence unfinished, hoping he'd take the bait and provide an explanation in less technical terms.

"The pattern woven under the skin was a levitation one," Masego explained. "The wings were... unexpected. When we pumped more power into the specimen to see if it was just a temporary manifestation it developed the fire-breathing."

"And that's... normal, by your standards?" I asked, keeping my face carefully blank.

The mage looked mildly amused. "Hardly the strangest thing I've seen. And if this pattern is repeatable, it has interesting connotations concerning the nature of dragons. After all they're-"

"She's not a practitioner, Masego. Your babble is wasted on her," the Warlock's voice interrupted fondly as we stepped into the workshop.

I had to confess I'd been rather curious as to what the personal workshop of a man who was among the five greatest mages in Calernia would look like. If the preaching in the House of Light was any indication it'd be filled to the brim with demons and other various blasphemies, but I'd learned to take what the Brothers and Sisters of my childhood taught with a grain of salt. The sprawling piles of old manuscripts that covered half the room weren't unexpected, but truth compelled me to admit that the tall windows were – a quick look told me that the view through them was in flat defiance of common sense: through one of them I could see Ater sprawled out in the distance, through another what seemed to be the skyline of an entirely different Praesi city. There were seven tall glass panels and every one of them overlooked a different sight, many of them separated by over a month's worth of travelling.

Stone shelves full of glassware flanked the windows, some empty and others filled with colourful liquids or dark shapes. The entire left half of the workshop was covered in cages of various sizes, most of them empty. The wrought iron bars were covered in runes and I glimpsed the silhouette of a hound made of smoke napping quietly inside one. The cage where the errant pig had been kept was easy to find, the iron lock keeping the door closed half-melted on the ground before it. I might have spent longer taking in the sights if someone hadn't cleared their throat – I pushed down an embarrassed blush and my eyes turned to the source of the noise.

"And so we finally meet, Catherine Foundling," the Sovereign of the Red Skies smiled.

I had to push down another blush, much to my dismay. Where Masego was plain, the Warlock was anything but. His skin was a little darker than his son's and they were of height, but that was where the resemblance ended. I could have compared the man to the fishermen boys I'd known in Laure and the way living in the water had granted them a swimmer's physique, but there was nothing boyish about the Warlock. His hair was cut short and showed some streaks of silver, though not as many as his close-cropped salt and pepper beard – the combination made him look rather distinguished, in an older man sort of way. His robes were a

tasteful shade of burgundy trimmed with gold, tightened at the waist by a belt of soft leather in a way that showed off the broadness of his chest and shoulders. *Don't gawk, Catherine. He's a least thrice your age and plays for the other side anyway.* That said, I could definitely see how the Calamity had managed to talk an incubus into marriage.

"Lord Warlock," I coughed out. "Well met."

The man in question smirked but passed no comment, Masego sighing as he passed him by and pushed the floating pig back in its cage. The distraction allowed me to get my thoughts in order and I gestured towards Hakram.

"Adjutant Hakram of the Fifteenth," I introduced him.

The Calamity cocked his head to the side, examining the orc.

"Howling Wolves?" he asked in Kharsum.

"On my mother's side," Hakram acknowledged in the same. "Weeping Stone on my father's."

Warlock grinned, displaying a set of remarkably white teeth.

"They won't be able to sweep you under the rug if you have kinship in Grem's clan. Someone in Ater is going to have a *fit* when word spreads."

He sounded pretty gleeful at the prospect. I kept my face pleasant but made a mental note of it. Of all the Calamities I'd met not a single one had ever spoken fondly of the Praesi nobility. Was that because they'd had so much pushback from them on their way up, or was there more to it?

"We were hoping to keep the word un-spread, for a little while," I spoke up, meeting the man's eyes squarely.

"Ah, youth," the Warlock mused. "It'll get out, Squire. It always does, and the tighter you grasp it between your fingers the more violently it will burst out."

I squared my jaw and prepared myself for an argument with a man best known for incinerating the better part of a thousand men on the Fields of Streges. Still, there was nothing for it. I wasn't going to allow Hakram to be a target, not before we had a better idea of what his situation involved and who would be coming after him.

"I'll remain discreet, no need for that look on your face," the Calamity chuckled. "That statement was meant in a broader sense."

I frowned. "Could have made that a little clearer," I pointed out.

Masego snorted from the other side of the room, where he was fitting in a new lock.

"This coming from a pupil of Uncle Amadeus?" he said. "The man can't pass a dish without turning it into something ominously cryptic."

Well, he wasn't wrong. "I've been wondering whether it's a Name thing or he just can't help himself," I admitted.

Warlock smirked. "He was already like that at sixteen," the Calamity replied. "Ranger used to throw cutlery at him every time he got too dramatic."

The image got a smile out of me. With a pair of incantations, Masego clicked the lock shut and released the spell on the pig before claiming a stool by one of the handful of work tables spread across the room. His father nodded in approval before turning his attention to us.

"To business, then," the man spoke, and it was enough to sober the amusement right out of my system.

"I'm guessing this is about the situation in the city," I grunted. "As it happens, I had a few questions myself about your involvement."

Or lack thereof, I added silently. The Warlock hummed in agreement and passed a hand over a few runes carved into the table where Masego had claimed a seat. The eldritch letters shimmered and small globes of light rose out of them, spreading and taking shape until a facsimile of Summerholm seen from above had formed over the table's length. The construct was white but some parts of it were shaded darker, mostly parts of the city that even my still-fresh military judgement understood to be key military positions. The defensive wards General Afolabi's envoy had mentioned, if I had to guess.

"There are a least four heroes in Summerholm as we speak," Warlock announced.

I raised an eyebrow. "The messenger from the Twelfth mentioned less."

"The General hasn't been informed," Masego murmured.

My eyes flicked to the Calamity. "I'm sure there's a good reason for that."

Warlock smiled unpleasantly. "General Afolabi's staff meetings are a leaking sieve."

I'd been about to point out it was pretty unlikely any Praesi soldiers would willingly betray the Legions to locals when I

realized that was rather missing the point. That was the Imperial way of thinking, and while it had its uses I'd not forgotten where I came from. *Servants, merchants, anyone with business in the Comital Palace.* Nobles from the Wasteland had this nasty tendency to see their attendants as moving furniture – it might not even have occurred to Afolabi that they could be eavesdropping when he met with his officers.

"You've been unable to locate them?" I asked instead.

"They have a Named capable of sorcery with them," Warlock spoke, distaste thick in his tone. "Their work is singularly incompetent, but they struck gold seemingly by accident – they botched their working and instead of blocking my scrying they've managed to set up a pattern that redirects the divination elsewhere."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're sure it was an accident? It seems like a fairly clever counter."

Masego snorted and Warlock scoffed. "It only worked because I'd tailored my spell to sketch out the edges of the zone where scrying was blocked," the Calamity explained impatiently. "Against a more common variant of the working it would have failed miserably. That kind of triumph through incompetence is the signature of Bumbling Conjurers."

Urgh, those. At least Bards were funny. The Bumbling types attracted failure like honey did flies, only ever managing to survive by the skin of their teeth with a heavy dose of luck. *Though can it really be called luck if having it is part of your Role?*

"So we have a band of heroes prowling about Summerholm with impunity," I grunted. "It seems to me that if you'd left the bastion you might have managed to thin them out a bit."

That was as close to outright asking the Warlock why he'd been holed up in his tower all this time while the city went to the dogs as I was willing to go, for now. Insolence could get results and I'd learned to harness my natural proclivity for it to my advantage, but when it came to Calamities it was better to start out treading lightly. The man brushed aside the implied question.

"Why do you think the heroes are in Summerholm?" he asked.

I raised an eyebrow. "If the Empire loses the city its supply lines are cut. The Legions will either have to live off the land, which brings recruits to the rebels, or set up a vulnerable backup with boats through the Hwaerte that can be targeted."

Warlock rolled his eyes, the gesture surprisingly youthful. "You're thinking like a general. The Lone Swordsman is a killer, not a strategist. Think like what you actually are: the Squire."

I passed a hand through my hair, frowning. The Swordsman wasn't really the one calling the shots in the Liesse Rebellion – Imperial intelligence had the Countess Marchford as the real power in the movement – but Warlock was correct in thinking that didn't mean the heroes had come here on her orders. *So what does Summerholm have that other Callowan cities don't?* The unrest here wasn't anything that couldn't be stirred up in Laure, and there were more citizens there to use as soldiers. If the target wasn't the city itself, then what was it? After a long moment, my eyes turned to the Calamity.

"You think they're after you," I spoke quietly.

Warlock smiled thinly. "I'm quite sure of it. And that is why neither I nor Masego are gallivanting through the streets in a hero hunt. That would be playing right into their hands."

I closed my eyes. "And that's why they're being borderline villainous in assassinating officers," I understood. "They're trying to draw you out by making the situation untenable."

There was a moment of silence and I noticed Masego was staring at me in surprise.

"What?" I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

"I did not expect you to take such a dim view of the Lone Swordsman's actions," the Apprentice admitted.

"I'm wearing legionary armour," I replied tiredly. "How much more obvious can I make my allegiances?"

The younger Soninke waved away the comment. "I don't mean in that sense," Masego replied. "The Lone Swordsman's actions, while brutal, are not something I'd consider entirely unjustified."

I bit my tongue on the reply that the Heavens would fall before I took a morality lesson from a Praesi, of all people.

"He's assassinating and torturing people, Apprentice," I retorted. "That's not exactly classic heroics."

"He's targeting military personnel only," Masego noted. "And while I suppose torture is somewhat reprehensible-" I raised an eyebrow at the 'somewhat' "- given that the Empire employs it as an information extraction method itself, it's hard to throw stones on the subject. Using all means available to resist a foreign occupation isn't something I'd call villainous."

"A hero's supposed to be more than a villain fighting for the opposite cause," I replied. "If he has no moral high ground to stand on, then what the Hells are all his followers fighting for?"

The Warlock cleared his throat. "While I'm sure hearing two teenagers debating the ins and outs of morality would be a fascinating experience, there are other priorities at play."

He seemed more amused than anything else, so I took the dismissal in stride. Masego looked like he wanted to continue the conversation, and to be honest I was rather inclined to indulge him. It would be pleasant, to have someone my age to talk about these things with. Hakram was the closest thing I had to a confidant in the Legion, but the orc take on ethics was... well, the less said about it the better. Using martial strength as your primary virtue had a way of affecting your other values. *Speaking of the devil*, I thought as my adjutant cleared his throat.

"Our entry into the city was the opposite of quiet," Hakram gravelled. "They're bound to react to another villain entering the city."

The Calamity smiled. "Precisely," he agreed. "And I think I know when and where they'll strike."

The man's finger tapped the facsimile silhouette of the Comital Palace.

"I believe you received an invitation to dine with General Afolabi tonight," he said.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. What did it say about me that every time I went to a dinner party it was with the intent of getting someone stabbed?

Chapter 6: Rapport

"There's no surer sign you're being played than being certain you've grasped your opponent's intent."

– Dread Emperor Benevolent

"It's from the Trismegistan theory of magic," Kilian explained.

"Well, that certainly clears things up," I replied dryly.

The redhead frowned at me. "Don't be a tit," she said, adding an absent-minded 'ma'am' a moment later. "I won't go into too many details – it's fairly technical knowledge – but the basics are that when the Gods made Creation they set down laws for the way everything works. Haven't you ever wondered why an apple falls down when you drop it?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Gravity seems the likely culprit, unless you're telling me it was a frame up all along."

"It's probably for the best you never attended any of the mage classes," the Senior Mage muttered under her breath. "Look, gravity doesn't apply everywhere. Exposed to the classical element of void, it tends to fizzle out."

I got the distinct impression out of that last sentence that the classical elements weren't what I thought they were.

"So it's not an immutable law," I grunted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kilian took a sip of the wine glass I'd handed her before beginning the conversation, leaning back in her seat. I was very careful not to let my thoughts linger on the fact that she was sitting just a dozen feet away from a very nice bed that could likely fit two people in it, should said people be willing to do a bit of... creative juxtaposition.

"It means the Gods put that law into place through their own power," Kilian informed me. "That's what we call a creational law, a rule that came into existence when the Gods manifested their power as the physical realm we inhabit."

I was fairly uneducated in matters of sorcery – pretty much all Black had ever bothered to teach me was that I did not have the inborn talent for it before moving on to the best ways to kill mages of different skill levels – but I wasn't an idiot. The implications here were fairly straightforward.

"So an original law is something that predates Creation," I guessed.

Kilian wiggled her hand in equivocation. "It's a law that exists independently of it. Like how you can't make something out of nothing, for example. Some argue that to qualify as an original law it has to apply to even the Gods."

"That sounds a mite heretical," I noted.

Implying that the Heavens were not omnipotent was a good way to get tossed out of the House of Light. Sure the priests admitted that the Gods had limits, but according to them they were self-imposed for the good of Creation.

The redhead smiled behind the rim of her glass. "Trismegistus is the Praesi name for the man who became the Dead King. A little heresy is to be expected," she replied.

That would explain it. Anyone who'd ended up turning the entire nation they ruled over into a horde of slaving undead was bound

to have a few disagreements on the nature of Creation with the clergy. *Still, hard to argue with a man who invaded one of the Hells.* Clearly the Dead King had done *something* right, for a very specific meaning of right.

"I'm curious where you encountered those terms to begin with," Kilian half-asked, her tone implying that if it wasn't something I could talk about she would understand.

She'd always been good about things like that. Maybe it was the way mages dealt with so many more secrets than regular people, especially in Praes.

"Ran into an experiment Apprentice and Lord Warlock were having in their tower," I told her. "Something about determining the nature of Demiurgian phenomena."

"Ah," the Senior Mage mused. "That would explain that massive ward around the bastion. They're separating the place from Creation proper."

I leaned forward, suddenly intent. "Is that what that was? I knew it wasn't a defensive thing, but what I can get from my trick is pretty limited. If it's not out to disembowel me, my Name doesn't give me much."

"I'd need to have a look up close to be sure," Kilian hedged, "but I can't think of anything else that big they would set up in a city. I'm not sure if it's a pocket dimension or if they're reaching for Arcadia, but the end result is largely the same."

Mhm. There were probably academic differences at play, but from a tactical point of view I could think of one reason the Warlock would set his home territory apart from Creation. It meant the man could actually cut loose if the heroes came knocking. I'd read the histories, after all. Warlock had ever only been deployed as a combat asset when my teacher was willing to write off wherever the battle was happening. If the Sovereign of the Red Skies decided to go all out in Summerholm it would make the goblinfire incident look like a tavern scuffle. It explained why he'd been sitting pretty in the bastion all this time, too. *So he wasn't just letting Summerholm spiral out of control, he was setting up his battlefield for a confrontation.*

"You have that look on your face," the redhead spoke softly. "The one that means you've figured out you were wrong about something."

"That a bad thing?" I asked mildly.

Kilian cleared her throat, looking rather bashful. "I like it. Most people do. Even Juniper said that the way you don't get

stuck in your preconceptions is 'laudable', and getting compliments out of her is like milking a stone."

I snorted. "Hard to get all high and mighty when you're wrong about things as often as I am," I admitted. "I'm lucky I found the people I did, to be honest. I'd have a lot more blind spots if I hadn't."

Sometimes I wondered what it said about me that all the people I trusted were Praesi, but what else could I do? If I wanted to get anything done in Callow I'd need the Fifteenth backing me and the core of my legion was from the Empire. In time that might change, but as the months passed I was beginning to think certain things might not. How could I trust a new officer more just because of the land of their birth, when the likes of Nauk and Robber had been with me since the beginning?

"I think we're luckier to have you," the redhead said softly. "I don't think you realize what it means, for the Fifteenth to have someone like you at the helm."

I hadn't drunk nearly enough wine to justify the flush that took my cheeks at the almost-whispered words. Gods but Kilian was pretty. I still didn't know if she had any interest in women, though. I'd thought about asking Hakram, but that would have been as good as declaring an interest and I wasn't quite there yet. Still. Unlike with pregnancies, it wasn't like... fraternization was against regulations, so long as the people involved weren't in a direct chain of command.

"Someone like me," I repeated in a murmur, wishing the redhead wasn't sitting on the other side of the table.

Kilian bit her lip. "A woman who-"

Someone knocked at the door and I felt the sudden urge to order a round of hangings. *Really*. Couldn't whoever that was have waited for another few moments? Hakram entered the antechamber a moment later and for the first time since I could remember I glared at my adjutant. The Senior Mage recoiled like she'd been burned, cheeks reddening. The tall orc eyed us both curiously, but he knew better than to ask.

"Report, Adjutant," I ordered with ill-grace.

"Ma'am," he saluted, raising hairless brows at my tone. "Your hunch was right. About twenty servants were indisposed at the last minute and had to be replaced by 'relatives'. We have the replacements in custody."

I grumbled under my breath, irked at the knowledge that the news would have kept if he'd waited a little longer.

"Were any of them armed?" I asked, setting aside my irritation for the moment.

The orc shook his head. "Several of them had scars, however. The kind you get in military service."

I grimaced. That was suspicious, but circumstantial at best. There were plenty of veterans from the Conquest who'd had to get mundane jobs after the Empire had taken over. The legal aspect of things didn't concern me overmuch: this would have been trickier elsewhere, but Summerholm was under martial law and regardless as the Squire I was pretty much a law unto myself. But part of me balked at ordering forceful interrogation based on barely floating evidence. We'd have to do without.

"Keep them under heavy guard," I told Hakram. "At least two lines, one of them with munitions. If someone with a Name mounts a rescue operation they should toss sharpeners in the cells before getting the Hells out of there."

I was less than optimistic when it came to the victory chances of my legionaries against a band of heroes, goblin munitions or not. The Fifteenth was already at half-strength, I had no intention of losing any more soldiers in a fool stand against the likes of the Lone Swordsman. A rough voice cleared their throat from the threshold to my rooms.

"Afolabi will get pissy if we move too many troops into the Comital Palace," Legate Juniper told me, strolling into the room.

Like the rest of the people in my quarters, she was in full legion gear. From the looks of it she'd had hers cleaned and polished recently, which as much of a concession to propriety I'd been willing to order my officers to make. Attending a dinner with a general of the Empire in armour was in poor taste but with the Swordsman likely to make an appearance I wanted them ready to fight.

"The general should have taken care of this fucking mess before we arrived, if he wanted to have that right," I grunted.

Juniper flashed ivory fangs in a hard smile at my words.

"I don't disagree," my Legate replied. "Just warning you we won't be making friends in the Twelfth with your plan."

"We'll deal with that if we survive the night," I mused.

Which was, truthfully, still up in the air. We had the defensive position and we knew they were coming, but four heroes weren't something to sneeze at. Entire kingdoms had been toppled by less. I wasn't going to risk Hakram in a fight, nascent Name or not, so my only back up for the initial phases of the battle would be

Apprentice. How useful the Soninke would actually be in a life-and-death struggle remained to be seen: he hadn't given me the impression he was someone used to the rougher side of being Named.

"Senior Mage," Juniper spoke flatly, only now deigning to acknowledge Kilian's existence. "Our caster lines will be needing their instructions soon."

The redhead flushed, looking guiltily at her half-finished wineglass.

"I had a few questions for her earlier," I told Juniper, hoping to deflect some of the attention.

"I'm sure you did," the Legate replied serenely, not a hint of impropriety on her face.

Hakram coughed into his fist and I made a mental note to take revenge on him for this at some point.

"Lady Squire, ma'am," Kilian saluted the both of us, pausing by a still-grinning Hakram to daintily kick his ankle.

Considering the orc's armour was the only thing thicker than his skin it did absolutely nothing to discipline him, but I approved of the general intention. I waited until she left the quarters to return my focus to Juniper.

"We've reinforced the palace garrison at all choke points?" I prompted.

The orc officer nodded. "Your special orders have been given to the troops at the gates," she said.

I'd kept those rather simple. *If a lone individual in a cloak approaches the entrance, shoot them until they stop moving. And then a few more times to be sure. Don't even bother hailing them, just unload your crossbows.* If the Lone Swordsman intended on making a dramatic entrance, he was in for a rough evening. Unfortunately, the bastard had taken to irregular warfare like a fish to water. I doubted he'd be stupid enough to try getting into the palace the old-fashioned way.

"I suppose we'd better get moving then," I grunted. "Has Apprentice showed up yet?"

Juniper cast a look at Hakram, who shook his head.

"Not yet," the adjutant replied. "I've taken the liberty of providing him an escort when he leaves the bastion."

I smiled at my officer, pleased at the initiative. I doubted the heroes would try picking off the Warlock's own adopted son in

broad daylight, but there was no sense in taking unnecessary risks.

"Ah, diplomatic dinners," Juniper grinned unpleasantly.
"Everybody's favourites."

"At least the food won't be poisoned this time," I noted. "That's a marked improvement."

"Does that mean you won't be breaking anyone's bones tonight?" the Legate asked wryly. "Shame, that was the best part of the evening."

I pushed myself to my feet, adjusting the sword at my belt.

"I'll see what I can do, Legate," I replied. "I'm sure there's at least *one* guest that could use the exercise."

—

The palace's banquet hall was the oldest part of the building and it showed in the stonework. Not that it was shoddy, but instead of imported granite from northern Callow the petty kings of old Summerholm had had to make do with local quartz deposits. Nowhere as good to hide under when trebuchets started singing, but back then siege engines had been fairly rare. I had two lines from Nauk's command idling around the hall's entrance, the boredom of the assignment warring with the warning their officers had given that they were likely to see fighting before the end of the night. General Afolabi had posted only a tenth of his own soldiers and they looked rather displeased to be sharing the duty with my own. *As long as they don't start fighting I couldn't care less.*

I let Juniper and Hakram stride ahead of me into the hall, slowing when I noticed a handful of people being interrogated by my soldiers. Four of them, to be exact. Three men and a woman, all of them adorned in fancy clothes and bearing musical instruments. The lieutenant in charge of security was ignoring the protests of the musicians and patting them down for weapons, at least those of them that were standing. The only woman had claimed a chair, propped her lute over her knees and seemed to be polishing off a flask of alcohol so strong I could smell it from where I was standing. I found the supreme unconcern rather amusing and out of curiosity I claimed the seat next to hers.

"Dare I ask what you're drinking?" I said.

She grinned drunkenly, shaking the silvery flask.

"Why, the very elixir of life," she replied theatrically. "Back home they call it the 'water that burns'."

"Well, anything in contact with it definitely would become flammable," I observed.

I didn't recognize her accent. Not Praesi or Callowan, and her colouring was a little too light to be a Taghreb's. Her strong nose and curly dark hair were striking, if short of outright attractive, provided no real hint as to her origins.

"Ashuran," the stranger said.

"Pardon me?" I replied.

"I'm Ashuran. You're trying to figure out where I come from," she told me amusedly. "The staring was a bit of a giveaway."

The Thalassocracy of Ashur, huh. First time I'd ever met anyone from there. It wasn't that they were isolationist, per se, but more that they rarely bothered visiting anywhere boats couldn't reach. The Ashurans had stayed much closer to their Baalite roots than the Dominion – they were still part of the Hegemony, for one. Not that being a member of the Baalite Hegemony meant as much as they once had. The old maritime empire had been on the decline since centuries before my birth.

"So why's an Ashuran bard trying to get drunk in a Callowan fortress?" I asked.

"I am not trying," she informed me proudly. "I am *succeeding*."

I snorted. She offered me the flask and, against my better judgement, I took a sip. I promptly started coughing.

"Gods," I rasped out. "How are you not dead?"

"My liver is cast iron," she admitted solemnly. "To answer your question, I drifted towards here when I heard about the rebellion. Seems to me there's a song in there."

I handed her the flask back and to my horror she drank from it like it was river water going down her throat.

"Are you even going to feel your fingers when you strum that lute?" I asked dubiously.

"Doesn't make as much of a difference as you'd think," she acknowledged cheerfully. "Besides, I am not a mere bard."

"This will be good," I coughed, still trying to rid my throat from the stranger's devil-water.

She rose to her feet, teetering back and forth and reached for something above her head. Her hand came back empty.

"Right," she muttered. "I lost the hat. No matter!"

Striking a pose with her foot resting on the seat she'd vacated, the woman swept the horizon in a generous gesture.

"Before you stands Almorava of Symra, minstrel without peer!"

She punctuated the announcement by sweeping a few strings, the resulting sound eerily similar to a cat getting stepped on. I could feel everyone else in the hallway suddenly staring at us and had to suppress a smile.

"That sounds technically true," I mused. "Have you considered you may have a drinking problem?"

"My flask is almost empty," Almorava agreed. "That *is* a problem."

The officer in command approached us carefully, hand on his sword.

"Lady Squire," he asked. "Is there a problem?"

I waved the question away. "None at all," I replied. "Continue your work, Lieutenant."

He saluted before returning to the other musicians. I felt the bard – ah, minstrel – staring at me and sighed. Well, so much for anonymity.

"Catherine Foundling," I introduced myself.

"I had a feeling," the Ashuran said. "Can't think of another reason they'd allow a Deoraithe your age this deep into the palace with a sword at her hip."

"Most people would be a little warier at the revelation they've been talking with a villain," I murmured.

"Most people would have passed out before they got halfway through the flask," Almorava grinned. "Besides, you've yet to set anyone on fire so at least one of the rumours is wrong."

Godsdamnit. Was that really going to follow me everywhere? At least she hadn't mentioned Summerholm or goblinfire. "There's rumours?"

The minstrel chuckled. "My dear lady, you're the Callowan apprentice of the man who conquered the Kingdom. There's a tale in every city from Ater to Salia, each wilder than the last."

"All of them flattering, I'm sure," I spoke drily.

Almorava hummed. "Opinions are split, actually. Of course there's the usual crowd in favour of removing the head of anything in contact with the Empire, but you'd be surprised how many Callowans are cautiously optimistic."

"That..." I trailed off. "You're right. I *am* surprised."

"There are some who think having one of their own high up in Imperial ranks might solve some of the most undesirable aspects of the Praesi occupation," the minstrel said. "They might not be as loud as the 'stone her to death' crowd, but they do exist."

"You seem remarkably well informed for a wandering minstrel," I said.

The Ashuran shrugged. "You pick up things, playing in taverns."

I'm sure you do. I rose to my feet.

"It was a pleasure, Almorava," I said. "But I have a reception to attend."

"Have fun," the minstrel waved cheerfully.

I kept my smile on my face until I'd turned, taking aside the lieutenant when I passed by him. I leaned into his ear.

"The woman I was talking to. She won't have any weapons, but I want a pair of crossbowmen keeping an eye on her at all times," I murmured.

The man nodded and I patted him on the shoulder, squaring my own as I entered the banquet hall. *Come out and play, Lone Swordsman. I'm ready for you this time.*

Chapter 7: Reception

"Always walk into traps. Evil is clever and patient and never as vulnerable as when it thinks it holds all the cards."

– Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

I'd been in a few dinner halls, now that I'd actually left Laure, but the Comital Palace's was by far the grimmest.

No tapestries or mosaics, not even a statue: naked stone everywhere, with carved large stone slabs for tables and smaller ones for benches. The only concession to the principle of decoration was the heraldry of the old Counts discreetly engraved on the seats – a lone soldier's silhouette standing on a wall. Even back in those days Summerholm had been the city where Imperial armies came to die, and its rulers had not been above making that quiet boast. In the back, at the head of the largest table, an imposing stone-wrought armchair sat as a makeshift throne. There was something undeniably odd about seeing a middle-aged Soninke in a silken tunic installed in an ancient Callowan throne, but I had to admit that General Afolabi Magoro cut a striking figure. Tall and broad-shouldered, his sharply angled face held deep-set eyes that restlessly scanned his surroundings.

On someone less powerfully built it might have leant the appearance of nervousness, but on this one it spoke of a careful awareness of his surroundings.

The guest list for the reception was blessedly short, thank the Gods. I'd brought few officers myself – Juniper, Aisha and Pickler. And Hakram, of course, but that went without saying. My adjutant dogged my steps like a second shadow, these days, a reassuring presence ever at my back. Commanders Hune and Nauk remained back in the Fifteenth's camp, overseeing our preparations, and Ratface had made himself scarce within moments of entering the city. He'd left a message indicating he'd gone to "make like a fishmonger", which I assumed to mean he was coordinating with Afolabi's Supply Tribune and discreetly swapping supplies with the other man. It better be, anyway, because if he'd ducked out for a drink I was assigning him to dig the latrines for Nauk's entire kabili. All bloody one thousand of them.

On the general's side attendance was even lighter: two Taghreb wearing the red and gold shoulder decorations of a Legate and a middle-aged goblin that bore a tribune's insignia. Afolabi's own Kachera Tribune, if I had to take a guess. Of all the man's general staff it would be the tribune in charge of scouting and information-gathering who'd have the most to contribute to the dinner conversation. Assuming we even got to dinner. I bet the Swordsman was the kind of asshole who'd launch his attack right before dessert, too. I'd been craving a good Callowan pastry for a while now and Summerholm was known for baking a sort of sweet bread with apple slices inside. If someone burst in with stirring heroics right before I got to dig in, things were going to get violent.

"Thinking deep thoughts, Catherine?"

The cheerful voice wasn't one I was accustomed to, but I did recognize it.

"Pondering dessert," I told Masego as he approached. "What passes for it in Praes has been something of a disappointment."

Pudding and strange pies, mostly.

"I hear you," the mage replied solemnly. "Father's fondness for lemon pie borders on self-destructive."

I snorted. "The Lord Warlock is a lemon enthusiast. Wouldn't have guessed."

"Wrong father," Apprentice grinned. "He doesn't even need to eat, you know, he just likes the taste."

I filed away the knowledge that incubi didn't need physical sustenance, wondering if it applied only to this particular breed or to devils in general. I had half a dozen questions on the tip of my tongue about how it had been, being raised by a couple half of which literally came from Hell, but this was neither the time nor the place. I'd already been borderline rude by delaying my meeting with the General to chat with a minstrel, no need to flagrantly snub him to make small talk with another guest.

"I suppose we should give General Afolabi our greetings," I sighed.

"Ah, politics," Apprentice chuckled. "I am so very glad my Role concerns itself almost entirely with sorcery."

"Lucky you," I grunted, making my way to the head table.

The man I'd come to greet was already seated, the only one in the hall to do so, and was talking with Juniper when I approached. Hakram stood a little behind my Legate, his face the picture of calm equanimity.

"- they field at least five hundred cavalry, from the reports."

"Callowan knights?" Juniper asked, frowning.

"Free Cities men, equipped in the style of Proceran cataphracts," Afolabi replied. "Make no mistake, Legate, they are deadly on flat ground. The Exiled Prince has been using them for lightning raids and they've caused more casualties on their own than the rest of Liesse's army put together."

He put aside the line of conversation when I came to stand before him.

"Lady Squire," he greeted me, offering his arm in the warrior's grip.

"General," I replied, firmly clasping his forearm.

"And Apprentice," he added after our arms withdrew. "Your presence is a rare surprise. Will your lord father be joining us?"

Masego ignored the pointed undertone and lack of offered grip without blinking an eye.

"Maybe later," the younger Soninke shrugged. "He's putting the finishing touches on a project better not left unattended."

Afolabi almost winced before getting his face under control. I could sympathize: anything the Sovereign of the Red Skies deemed worthy of continued supervision was not something you wanted loose in a city that was your responsibility. Putting Summerholm

under martial law meant that if any damages occurred while the city was under it the Tower would be expected to foot the bill. Explaining to the Imperial bureaucracy that a few hundred thousand aurei had to be sent west to make up the damages caused by a fully incarnated demon would be a very, very unpleasant conversation. I decided to steer this towards a relatively safer subject.

"The Duke of Liesse is fielding cavalry, then?" I asked. "I hadn't heard."

"The only thing the Duke fields is a banquet table," Afolabi sneered in contempt. "The Countess Marchford is the only opposing strategist worth considering in this campaign, but it is not her forces with the horsemen. She based the mercenary company known as the Silver Spears in her demesne and it's been harassing our flanks."

Cavalry had always been the glaring weakness of the Legions of Terror. Horses were rare in Praes and the Empire's neighbours had been understandably reluctant to ever sell them any. The closest the Legions could put forward was orcish wolf riders, but Black had spent an entire evening with me detailing the many limitations of those. They were harder to supply, for one. The breed of Steppe wolves that grew large enough to be ridden required a prodigious amount of meat to sate their hunger, and out on a campaign letting them hunt was rarely an option. There was also the fact that, when it came down to it, horse cavalry was almost always better. They were quicker, heavier, and much less reluctant to run straight into a line of enemy soldiers. Wolf mounts were also much harder to replace: they were raised with their rider and should the orc die they would violently refuse another one. Sometimes they even went berserk with grief and had to be put down. Worse, humans and goblins were unable to use them. The few experiments made to adapt them had led, Black implied, to well-fed mounts but no progress whatsoever. As raiders and tools to spread terror they were second to none, but it had to be kept in mind they were a very specialized kind of cavalry.

"We'll have to root them out if we're to move deeper south," I noted.

"Word is that will be the Fifteenth's assignment," Afolabi murmured. "A decent way to blood your legion before sending it into heavy combat."

"Finally," Juniper grinned. "Something to sink our teeth in."

The general looked amused. "You really are your mother's- "

A distant explosion struck, covering the end of the older Soninke's sentence. Everyone but Masego reached for their weapon, even Afolabi fishing out a wicked-looking dagger from his sleeve.

"Sharpers," Juniper stated.

"At least three, no more than six," Senior Sapper Pickler contributed, scuttling up to us with her sword out. "The detonation was inside the palace."

"Our guests have arrived, Hakram," I spoke. "Send word to Commander Hune – move the troops in place. I want the palace surrounded immediately."

The general stared me down. "You knew this was coming."

"I had a feeling," I admitted.

"A word of warning would have allowed my legionaries to prepare," he spoke through gritted teeth.

"Your legion has been infiltrated," I informed him. "It would have tipped our hand early."

He looked rather displeased at that, but he'd have to live with it. It wasn't like it wasn't true. My gaze swept over our guests, now including the bards from earlier, and inspiration suddenly struck.

"Masego," I asked urgently. "That time when you picked up on a Name, can you do it again?"

The younger Soninke pushed up his spectacles. "Depends on the Name, but usually yes. Why?"

"Look at the Ashuran bard and tell me–"

And shit, she was moving. I'd known there was something strange about her.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Almorava announced, unslinging her lute. "A song I composed for you. It's called '*walking into an obvious trap because William has a chip on his shoulder, godsdamnit*'."

I brought my hand down without missing a beat and the two crossbowmen watching her immediately fired. The Ashuran twisted in a way that suggested highly unnatural degrees of limberness, both bolts coming within a hair's breadth of her without actually drawing blood.

"Swords out," I ordered. "She's a hero."

Everyone in the room save for the other bards unsheathed their blades, the other musicians hurriedly edging away from the declared heroine.

"You could have let me sing a bit, at least," the minstrel complained. "I've been working on the tune for like a fortnight."

I deftly jumped over the table, Hakram and Juniper following close behind as Pickler produced a sharper from Gods knew where. She wasn't even carrying a satchel. I was more than a little wary of engaging a single hero when we had such an overwhelming numerical superiority – that did not usually end well for the villains, in the stories – but I couldn't just let her be either. Reluctantly, I admitted to myself that capture wasn't an option here. I had no idea what she was capable of, but Names like Bard and Minstrel were usually talented escape artists.

"If you surrender now I can make it painless," I told her.

"I'm not going to die, Catherine Foundling," she replied, apparently unmoved by the fact that she was surrounded and unarmed. "I can't fight for the life of me and the only magic at my disposal is my *glorious* musical talent, but I do have one thing on you."

"And what would that be?" I asked, against my better judgement.

Hakram groaned behind me.

"Now and then, I get to have a look at the script. Today's not the day I bite it."

She smiled as I crossed the last few feet between us at a run, sword in hand.

"See you soon. Wandering Bard, exit stage left."

She took a step to the left, and before her foot could actually touch the ground she was... gone. Not a trace of her. Had she teleported? No, that was impossible. The amount of power needed for that would have been felt everywhere in the city, and I hadn't gotten so much as a twinge from this.

"Masego, do you have a spell that checks for invisibility?" I barked.

Without bothering to reply, Apprentice murmured an incantation and waved his hand across the room. Another explosion sounded in the distance, louder. Not sharpeners, this time. I recognized the noise without Pickler's help: those had been demolition charges. *Shit*. None of my legionaries had brought those, which meant the heroes had gotten their hands on munitions. *So that's why the Thief wanted those keys. I should have prepared for that, I*

chastised myself. The Lone Swordsman had a history of using goblin munitions, it wasn't that hard to put together.

"No one's in here but us," Masego spoke up.

I frowned at him. "You're sure?"

He looked mildly offended. "Not even Assassin could hide from that spell. I'm *quite* sure."

I took his word for it, turning to Juniper. "I want you and the Tribunes to stay here and protect the general, he's bound to be a target."

The man in question snorted. "Much appreciated."

My Legate nodded, slowly sheathing her sword.

"Hakram, Masego," I said without turning. "We're going hunting."

—

I left a full line covering Afolabi along with my officers, bolstering his own guard.

I hadn't brought my shield or helmet into the banquet hall, but Hakram had arranged for one of the guards to be carrying them. Going against the Swordsman with anything but my best struck me as a very bad idea. I tightened my helmet's clasps under Apprentice's impatient gaze, noting he was rather eager to move for someone who'd never been in proper combat as far as I knew. He snorted when I pointed out as much.

"It's a rare thing to get the chance for a magical duel between Named these days," Masego informed me. "Uncle Amadeus and Assassin kill most heroes before they can make a nuisance of themselves."

"With reason," I grunted, picking up my shield.

The Soninke shrugged. "I've been meaning to test the limits of what I can do, and Legion mages are a laughable benchmark in this regard."

Not exactly complimentary, but mage lines weren't meant to be particularly versatile. Their purpose was massed firepower, and in that regard they served perfectly well. I wasted no time in explaining this, though, since now wasn't the time for a debate. I'd placed several fast-response teams in key positions inside the Comital Palace in anticipation of the heroes' arrival, with orders to engage at a distance only and to immediately send a runner if they came across someone with a Name. While I fully intended on engaging the heroes only with legionary support, sending them in alone against the likes of the Lone Swordsman was

a recipe for slaughter. I led my small team in the direction the demolition charges had been detonated, but before we ran into the enemy we came across Robber's line. And a little more, actually. There were a handful of orcs with the goblins, most of which were wounded. Nothing life-threatening, but there would be scars.

"Boss," the goblin greeted me, idly smothering the sharper he'd just lit. "Good to see you."

"Report, Tribune," I grunted. "You were watching the prisoners, what happened?"

"Some angry guy with a whiny sword and a tattooed streetwalker with spear," he explained. "We blew up the captives and bailed, like you said, but most of the other line was slaughtered during our retreat."

I winced. Evidently the whole 'killing the prisoners' backup plan had put the Swordsman in a foul mood.

"Stick with us," I ordered. "We're going after them."

"Hear that boys and girls?" the tribune called out to his legionaries. "We're having a rematch with shiny boots and his concubine, only this time we've got Catherine fucking Foundling. What do we say to that?"

"*Stab the kidney, loot the corpse,*" the goblins in his line called out with enthusiasm, the handful of surviving orcs echoing the sentiment with growls.

Sometimes I worried about my sappers, I really did. The legionaries fell behind in proper order and we moved out at a brisk pace, weapons at the ready. Progress was too slow for my tastes, but I'd always known I'd be on the defensive for this fight.

"So who are you, four-eyes?" I heard Robber ask behind me.

"Four-eyes, really?" Masego replied. "That's what you're bringing to the table? I've met wittier imps, and most of them aren't sentient enough to talk."

"Ah, the warlock's get," the tribune caught on. "I've always wondered – when your daddies do the deed, who's the sword and who's the sheath? Be precise, I have twenty denarii riding on this."

"So *that's* why goblin life expectancy is so short," Apprentice mused.

Evidently, the beginning of a beautiful friendship. The wing of the palace we were headed towards held the armoury as well as the palace guard quarters. Why the Swordsman had chosen to hit there

as his opening move remained to be seen: it was bound to be swarming with Twelfth Legion soldiers, not to mention Kilian's mage line had been close by. Maybe he'd been trying to take out as many legionaries as possible? *That can't be it, he's got to know if he does a straightforward assault we'll overwhelm him through sheer numbers.* What else was there? From what I remembered of the palace plans Hakram had found for me, there were stairs leading up to the fortifications on top of the palace and one of the two side exits. *I guess we'll find out soon.* We kept the same fast pace all the way to the guard quarters, where from the moment we stepped into the neighbouring hallway we were able to hear the noise of fighting ahead.

"Regulars with me and Hakram," I ordered grimly. "Sappers, take your shots carefully and remain out of range. Masego..." I hesitated. "Do what you think is best."

"I always do," Apprentice replied indifferently.

I got a chorus of acknowledgements from the legionaries and we burst into the quarters at a run. A wide room with now upended tables and benches greeted me, a rack full of weapons propped up against the wall having been tipped over at some point in the fighting. The first thing I noticed was Kilian's line headed by the woman herself, her tenth of regulars kneeling with their large shields in front of the mages like a makeshift wall. A salvo of fireballs sailed up towards a set of stairs in the back, where a dozen people armed with sword and shield were making a retreat. A man in too-large clothes standing behind them let out a startled yelp and waved his hand, detonating the spellwork from my mages in mid-air. The flash of fire was blinding but I charged forward, Hakram at my side and my orc legionaries close behind. I'd only been in the room for a heartbeat but there was no mistaking the power pulsing from the enemy mage: he had a Name, and not a meek one.

"She's here!" the man called out. "Do it now!"

Half a dozen clay balls landed across the room, breaking easily and spreading a dark oily liquid. One of the invaders threw a torch without missing a beat and in the blink of an eye half the room was swallowed by vivid green flames. Goblinfire.

"Godsdamnit," I cursed. "I better not be blamed for this one."

Chapter 8: Reversal

"There's nothing better in life than the look on your enemy's face when they realize you've played them every step of the way. Why do you think I keep starting secret cabals trying to overthrow me?"

– Dread Emperor Traitorous

Who was I kidding? I was definitely getting blamed for this one.

There were a few downsides to the whole villain thing, aside from the ever-worrying moral issues. The situation had gone from pretty even to bad in a pinch: with the goblinfire splitting the room in two there was no way for me to get my legionaries across to get into melee with the enemy. I still had the advantage at range, given my line of sappers and Kilian's mages, but that didn't mean shit if the Swordsman's lackeys ran away up the stairs. *Well, at least no one tried to kill me yet. A refreshing change, really.* Not even a heartbeat later a man dropped from the ceiling like a demented bat and chucked a javelin at me – I barely got my shield up in time, deflecting the projectile to the side and dangerously close to Hakram's legs. The ceiling. The actual ceiling. *Heroes.*

"One day," I told myself out loud, "I will learn to stop doing that. I really will."

"I'm told Evil is habit-forming, *miscreant*," the newcomer sneered. "Don't count on it."

Considering the man's outfit consisted of leather pants leaving little to the imagination and a matching vest that prominently displayed his tattooed chest, odds were this was the "streetwalker with a spear" Robber had earlier referred to. And would you look at that, besides the handful of javelins on his back he was also armed with a long spear currently pointed in my direction. The only surprise in this was that my tribune hadn't made something out of the plethora of silver bells woven into the hero's flowing locks.

"Miscreant," I repeated. "That's the best you could manage? I get harder sass than that from my officers, and they're not even trying to hurt my feelings."

"HUNTER," the mage above yelled. "Stick to the plan! William told us not to fight her!"

Huh, so the Swordsman's actual name was William. Good to know. The idiot up on the stairs made a valid point, though: now that he was on my side of the fire, the failed exotic dancer was mine. I pointed my sword towards the troops on the stairs without missing a beat.

"Spargere," I ordered.

Scatter, in Old Miezani. The official command for the use of sharpers. Robber's sappers obeyed like the well-oiled machine they were and I turned my eyes on the hero. That should have been enough keep the others busy for a while. Hunter stepped forward fluidly, clearly intent on a dramatic duel, but I was having none of that.

"Fireballs, Kilian," I spoke over the roar of the flames and raised my shield as I made for the enemy.

The man's look of horrified surprise was priceless as sharpers exploding in the background punctuated the scene. Was it villainous to delight in fucking over your enemies? Because the glee I felt at the sight of the man trying to dodge a salvo of fireballs with only five feet of space to work with felt a little unholy. He gave it a decent shot but my mages were professionals and he took one in the legs and another in the chest, sorcerous flames scorching his exposed skin like a pig on a spit.

"That's why we wear armour, you bloody amateur," I muttered under my breath.

The blasts had knocked him off his feet and before he could get up I was on him, kicking him in the chest like I'd done to so many Pit fighters back in the good old days. Unlike those same men, though, he rolled with it and deftly pricked at me with his spear. Maybe if I hadn't trained with the likes of Black and Captain the speed would have surprised me, but as things stood I slapped away the pathetic effort for what it was and retaliated by scoring a vicious gash on his cheek. I'd aimed for the eye to cripple as early in the fight as I could, but the bastard somehow managed to twist away and land in a crouch. I would have been impressed by the flexibility displayed were I not currently doing my best to stab him. From the corner of my eye I saw a glowing blue projectile flying towards me but an identical one collided with it a heartbeat later, both fizzling out under the impact.

"The Magic Missile. You filthy dabbler," Masego laughed behind me. "Please, Conjurer, allow me to school you in how a *real* mage fights."

I would have taken a break from my own fight to remind Apprentice that monologues were one of the leading causes of villain deaths, but before I could open my mouth the door we'd gone through was ripped off its hinges and flew through the air in the other mage's direction twice as fast as the blue projectile had. Clearly, Apprentice had that one under control. My momentary distraction was rewarded by Hunter flicking the tip of his spear close to my chin, but I hunkered down behind my shield and let the probe go without retaliation. The hero was trying to edge around me so he could sink his teeth into the relatively easier targets that were Robber's line and the orc survivors, but Hakram was having none of it. His rectangular legionary's shield up and his sword ready in the middle line, he stepped into the hero's path. Stuck between a better fighter and an orc wall of muscle and steel the Hunter naturally fell back on the time-honoured heroic tradition of talking shit.

"Typical villain," he mocked. "Can't take me on--"

My heater shield impacted brutally with his face and I felt the nose shatter with feral satisfaction. He roared and dropped his spear, which I would have counted a victory had he not promptly socked me in the mouth. I reeled back and paused to spit out a mouthful of blood. *Weeping Heavens, I think he dislodged a tooth.*

"Gonna be that way, is it," I growled.

"Loos' li' t," he replied in a tone that tried very hard to be intense.

The effect was somewhat damaged by the fact that the broken nose made him sound like a drunken Proceran with a cold. He brought up his fists and Hakram snorted, moving to flank him. From the corner of my eye I saw Masego pick up the pieces of the now-shattered door with a spell and wedge shards into the flesh of the men surrounding the Bumbling Conjuror, resisting the urge to wince at the sight. Those would be a little more unpleasant to get out than a splinter, assuming any of them survived. As the mage hero tried to muster a counterattack I heard Robber call for a volley of crossbow bolts and to my pleased surprise one of them sank into the Conjuror's shoulder. The mage let out a cry and spun at the impact, taking a dangerous step towards the edge of the stairs. For a moment it looked like he'd manage to get his balance back, but then he tripped on his own robes and fell. He landed below on one of the tables taken by goblinfire, his fall flipping the now-flimsy structure and sending the large wooden circle rolling straight towards me.

"Oh for Heaven's sake," I snarled, throwing myself out of the way.

Kilian's mages hit it with fireballs a moment later, doing nothing to hinder the flames but the impact was enough to knock the table top back down. By the time I was back on my feet, the Hunter had made a daring tactical retreat, landing on the edge of the stairs as he swung from a rope attached to a javelin stuck in the ceiling. My mages and sappers had thinned out the enemy soldiers despite their best effort to form a shield wall, but out of the four remaining one hoisted the Conjuror back up and cleanly cut through the part of the hero's robes that was on fire.

"Shoot them," I yelled.

The burst of lightning that was Kilian's signature hit the wall besides the heroes with a clap but it missed and before the rest of her line could follow suit the soldiers ran up the stairs and out of sight, dragging the Conjuror with them. The Hunter lingered just a moment, eyeing me stonily in the hellish green light provided by the spreading goblinfire.

"Be will mee' agin, Squiwe, anb-"

Without missing a beat, Robber pulled his crossbow's trigger and the bolt ran through the bastard's calf with a glorious ripping sound. I had never loved my vicious little tribune more than I did in that moment, as the hero squealed and scampered out of sight.

"I'm putting you up for commendation," I told the grinning goblin before turning to Masego. "Apprentice, can you get us across the room?"

"One at a time," he replied without hesitation. "And you'll need to clear out around me."

"Do it," I grunted without bothering to ask what in all the Hells he meant by that.

Now was not the time to be picky, not with the goblinfire slowly swallowing up the entire room. This was going to be a long-term problem, I knew. Even a small fire like this could swallow up the entire Palace given enough time, and I was starting to have a feeling that this wasn't the only arson the Lone Swordsman had ordered tonight. It made sense, the more I thought about it. If he knew most of his enemies would be in the same place and not in a position to even notice the goblinfire until it was too late, why *wouldn't* he put the place to the torch? Masego took a deep breath and closed his eyes, throwing a hand forward as the trinkets and stones in his braids started glowing.

"Cocytus, curse of traitors, tyrant of winter," he spoke in Mthethwa, his voice going unnaturally deep. "By my borrowed blood I call on you. Contracts were made, debts incurred."

Apprentice's eyes opened, now a deeply disquieting shade of gold. Even through the smoke choking the room I could smell brimstone.

"My will is paramount, here and forever. *Drown the world in ice.*"

A shiver went down my spine that had little to do with the freezing cold that somehow took over a room largely on fire. If that wasn't calling on a contract with a devil, I would shave my head and become a nun. A wind howled that all of us felt without it actually being a physical thing and from Apprentice's hand emerged a small globe of ice-clear water. It flew through the air until it stood a few feet in front of the edge of the goblinfire, then suddenly dropped. The moment it touched the ground a stream of ice burst out of the point of contact, Masego gritting his teeth as he moulded the constant flow into a large bridge that stretched all the way to the stairs on the other side of the room. The Warlock's son let out a grunt of effort when the bridge was finished, barking something out in the caster's tongue before dropping to his knees, panting in exhaustion. Most of my legionaries eyed him with quiet awe and more than a little fear, so I cleared my throat.

"Good work, Apprentice," I congratulated him. "So, now we move to the pressing issue: who's going across the creepy frozen demon bridge first? Volunteers, please step forward."

Hakram cussed out a laugh. I shot Kilian a smile, and the responding one split her soot-covered face.

—

Masego was looking better by the time we finally engaged in pursuit. He was still drenched in sweat but his hair was no longer doing the torch impression, which I took to be a good sign. I patted him on the back and he pushed up his glasses, looking a little bemused.

"Any reason you didn't decide to go all mage of mass destruction during the actual fight?" I asked, taking care not to sound accusing.

He wasn't an idiot, likely there was a good reason.

"Being interrupted while calling on a contract would be... bad," he grimaced. "A golden opportunity for the Conjurer to bumble his way to victory. Or at least a common defeat."

"How bad are we talking?" I questioned, morbidly curious.

"An entire wing of the Palace frozen for at least the next century," he replied.

"That's pretty bad," I agreed.

Considering we had been in said wing at the time, that would have been a less than optimal result. My trust in Apprentice's judgement grew accordingly, though the whole devil contract thing was definitely getting brought up again in the future. The heroes had been helpful enough to leave a trail of blood for us to follow so I knew we were headed in the right direction, but where they were headed was puzzling me. The roof of the palace would certainly be a dramatic place for a showdown, especially if the place was on fire, but they had to know they were putting themselves in a corner. Unless that was the point? Was the Swordsman deliberately engineering a situation where his band of heroes was up against the wall and outnumbered? That was definitely a setting where a hero could make a last-minute comeback and carry the day, but the Lone Swordsman had so far been pretty careful to always stack the odds in his favour when he could. This would be unusually risky of him, especially when Warlock had yet to take the field. *He didn't have a Bard to advise him before, though*, I thought. *He might have adjusted his tactics since we last met*. Gods, I hoped not. My own plan had been designed with his usual behaviour in mind.

So far the situation was still relatively under control. General Afolabi was still alive and under heavy guard, Commander Hune should have the palace surrounded for when the heroes tried to escape and William's lackeys had been driven back. I wasn't sure how many soldiers he'd brought with him, but it couldn't have been too many. That we'd caught two dozen early must have cost him, and the casualties they'd incurred in the earlier skirmish would only widen the gap. I'd dispersed about a company and a half inside the Comital Palace as fast response teams, which were still alive as far as I knew, and legionaries from the Twelfth should have begun to mobilize. What I'd put into place wasn't so much a plan as it had been a palette of tools for me to use, when it came down to it. I'd taken a page from Juniper's book and put my soldiers in key positions so I'd always have resources at my disposal to meet anything the Swordsman could dish out. I'd learned from the war games: elegant, complicated plans always collapsed before they could work properly. I had a talent for improvisation, so I might as well make use of it. Still, I had the niggling feeling I'd missed something. Why have the Bard scope out the banquet hall if he hadn't meant to assault it? More than that, why set the Comital Palace on fire if he intended on fighting inside of it?

I'd earlier thought it made sense for him to try to take out the majority of the enemy leadership inside their own stronghold with goblinfire, but his own people were inside too. For that plan not to be imbecilic, his crew should have been outside of the palace waiting in ambush to take us out when we fled. Instead he'd very loudly assaulted the place before starting with the goblinfire, tipping his hand early and allowing to interrupt his minions.

"Hakram," I murmured, turning towards my right hand. "I think we're being played."

The orc's dark eyes met me from under the shade cast by his helmet.

"I'm getting to that conclusion myself," my adjutant grunted. "Something's wrong here. Robber saw the Swordsman earlier, so where the Hells is he? If he'd been with the other two heroes earlier, he might have tipped the balance."

"The whole skirmish could have been a distraction," I guessed. "So he'd be able to get at Afolabi without my getting in the way."

The tall orc shook his head. "Doesn't fit. He hasn't targeted the general so far, and he had plenty of time before we arrived. He's not been shy about taking out Legion leadership so far."

"He could have held off until now to maximize the chaos," I replied, but it felt like I was grasping at straws.

"You need to stop thinking like a general, Squire," Masego interrupted, catching up to us. "We've had this conversation before, remember? The Twelfth has never been the target here. Neither was Summerholm itself."

I started. "You think your father's still the target," I realized, then shook my head. "Doesn't fit, Apprentice. We know the Swordsman was here not long ago, he was seen. He'd never attack Warlock without being the tip of the spear."

The Soninke rolled his eyes. "Gods save me from Callowans. They have a *mage*, Catherine. Not a Legion barely-literate thug, someone who went through an apprenticeship. Do you really think they can't cast an illusion that basic?"

I let out the filthiest curse I knew, absent-mindedly deciding it was a good thing Kilian and her line hadn't been close enough to hear that.

"Robber," I barked out. "When you ran into the heroes in the cells, did the Swordsman actually kill anyone?"

The tribune blinked.

"... No," he said after a moment. "The streetwalker was the one who did all the heavy lifting."

Shit. So while we'd been running around like headless chickens putting out fires and pursuing his minions, he'd been loose in the city. Where Warlock was defenceless, at least as defenceless as a Calamity could ever be. That was the thing, though. Warlock was a legend, a monster straight out of the stories that could level half a city and call on the worst denizens from Below. *Exactly the kind of enemy heroes are supposed to face and kill.* Finally making it up to the rooftops, we stood overlooking the city. A little further ahead a rope was swinging in the wind, making an escape route down the back of the roof, far away from the fire.

"Don't look so worried, Squire," Masego said. "The bastion is slightly askew from Creation, remember? If they try to break in they're in for some very nasty surprises, heroes or not."

I looked into the distance and felt my stomach drop.

"Goblinfire eats magic, right?" I asked.

Apprentice frowned. "Correct. Why would that matter?"

"So what would happen if someone set the bastion on fire with some?"

The mage paled. "That would... the interior is the part that's dimensionally removed, it's still contained by the physical

structure. Oh, Merciless Gods. The power has to go *somewhere*, Catherine."

Kilian's words drifted back to the fore of my mind. Massive, she'd called the ward.

"Can he bring down the ward, Masego?" I asked quietly. "Before it turns Summerholm into a field of ashes?"

And his son along with it, I finished silently. Apprentice nodded.

"But the backlash..."

"Would weaken him," I finished. "Enough that a group of heroes might be able to kill him, if they hurry."

In the distance the western bastion burned green, a candle lit to announce the death of a legend.

Chapter 9: Rematch

"I never keep grudges. Not for long, anyway."

– Dread Empress Maleficent II

We might still make it in time, if we hurried.

That was the unspoken thought ringing through our minds as we ran through dark streets, the Comital Palace cutting a dark silhouette in the distance. Our gambit was that William wouldn't want to risk taking on a Calamity without his entire band of heroes being present, which meant that if we caught up with Hunter and Conjuror we'd hit them right before they assaulted Warlock. There were only three of us now, Hakram and I following close behind Apprentice as he guided us through unfamiliar territory. Waiting for all of my legionaries to shimmy down the rope would have taken too long, especially given the equipment some of them carried. Better to have them catch up whenever they could. Commander Hune should have set up road blocks around the palace anyway, I could grab some backup when we ran into one.

While I had no personal affection for Warlock, I could recognize it would be a very bad thing if the heroes managed to kill him – or even seriously wound him. Black hadn't been kidding when he'd told me that order in Praes rested on the myth of Imperial invincibility. The old defeats had been washed away by the unbroken string of victories that had flowed since the first days of the Conquest, but if the Swordsman managed to kill a Calamity... Word would spread slowly at first, but it would spread. Retired soldiers all over Callow would reach for their swords and wonder if, perhaps, now was not the time to settle the old score. Maybe once that thought would have brought a smile to my face, the

prospect of the land of my birth fighting tooth and nail to gain back its independence, but I knew better.

I had seen the Imperial war machine up close, learned its ways and commanded its soldiers. Any war of liberation would turn into a bloodbath and, worst of all, Callow would lose. Half the country would be turned to ashes before the last of the resistance was put down, and when the Tower's authority finally went unchallenged then the Procerans would strike. Like they were doing now, through their puppet Liesse. The knowledge that the First Prince was funding the rebellion had not come as a surprise to me, but even now it left a foul taste in my mouth. Once again Callow was the battleground where the continent attempted to keep Praes in check, and it would be my compatriots who'd see their lands ravaged for that "holy" purpose. The awareness that I was anything but blameless in this made it even worse.

I'd let the Lone Swordsman go knowing he would set Callow aflame, knowing that thousands would die in a calculated gambit on my part to rise to prominence in the Empire. Once, when I'd had my perspective *nudged* by my encounter with William, I'd been disgusted at the idea of Black sacrificing my countrymen like cattle to see me healed. Every day since I'd wondered at that particular bit of hypocrisy. Was I not doing the same, by letting a hero go free for my own purposes? That I had benefitted directly from the ritual sacrifice of the death row inmates instead of in an abstract sense had seemed important, back then, but now I wondered. I'd put on a villain's cloak for the sake of Callow, telling myself it was for a greater good, but at the first given occasion I'd pushed the same country into civil war.

I still believed, deep down, that the ends justified the means. That by bleeding away a few thousand lives now I was securing a better future for Callow, one where the Imperial yoke held the Old Kingdom without strangling it. And yet how could I not be worried, when the monsters I rubbed elbows with lived by the same ideology? Malicia, Black, Captain, even Warlock – they all seemed so *reasonable*. They were Evil, certainly, but in a world where Evil would always exist having such a rational form of it in charge seemed like the best possible outcome. I had arrived at that conclusion just as rationally, but on an instinctive level I found it deeply repugnant that the best outcome in anything could be the subjugation of my people to foreign nobility that openly considered Callowans little better than cattle. There were no easy solutions for me, no magical fixes that would see everything end happily ever after.

How strange, that I had turned from a girl who didn't believe in stories into a villain living through one.

It didn't matter, in the end. I was committed. My choices had been made. I'd sold what little soul I had to barter with for a

sword and the right to use it to hack Creation into something that suited me better. The Lone Swordsman thought he was freeing Callow, but all he'd accomplished was the making of a few corpses and the waving of old banners. Change, real change, had to be carved into the very institutions that held nations together. Anything else would just crumble in the span of a lifespan, when the individual who'd managed it by sheer force of personality died. I had studied the defeats and triumphs of the Empire and learned this: to change Creation, it was not enough to simply kill the parts of it that oppose you. You could rage at the tide for your whole life, the way so many Dread Emperors and Empresses had, but no amount of flying fortresses and ancient ascension rituals were going to earn a lasting victory.

For over a millennium Praes had unsuccessfully attempted to invade the Kingdom through mad and vainglorious plans but they had all come to naught, because the reality had been that Callow's armies were stronger than the Empire's.

My teacher had won because he'd recognized that fact and then changed the Legions into something reflecting the outcome he'd desired. No armada of gargoyles, no child sacrifice-powered landships, just the patient labour of true reform. If I wanted Callow safe and prosperous, it was that same kind of work I needed to get done. Anything else and I'd just be William's villainous mirror, raging at a status quo and uselessly attempting to topple it one corpse at a time. Just thinking of it was enough to send a fresh wave of rage through me. What did the Swordsman think he would accomplish by this? Holding an entire city hostage to kill a single man. Over fifty thousand lives risked on a gambit that wouldn't even win the war, just broaden it. I'd not turned a hero loose so much as a plague.

I continued to stew in my thoughts as we turned a corner, but the sound of fighting up ahead brought me sharply back to the there and now. The street in front of us narrowed near the head and my legionaries had put up a barricade there, sharp wooden sudis and requisitioned chariots blocking it all but for a slim way in. There should have been legionaries with crossbows posted right behind it, but there was no sign of them. It was easy to see why: someone had forced their way through a chariot with brute force, splitting it in half and engaging the soldiers up close. Without a word I unsheathed my sword and brought up my shield, picking up the pace until I overtook Masego.

"Names up ahead," Apprentice spoke, tone relieved. Understandable: if they were here, killing my men, they weren't going after his father's head. "Two of them. Our friends from earlier, if we're lucky."

Luck was for people without Roles, I thought. Our lives were signed away to coincidence the moment we claimed our power.

"Focus on the Conjurer," I ordered. "Hakram, we're taking out Hunter. Fast, before he can do more damage."

"Aye," my adjutant growled. "Let's even the score a little further."

We made through the destroyed barricade at a run, passing a handful of legionary corpses as we did – most of them had spear wounds, though at least one had been partly incinerated. Funny how the aftermath of combat magic was horrifying no matter whether it was a hero or a villain who'd used it. There was no good way to die, but I'd always thought that mage fire was a particularly bad way to go. What must have been two full lines had been whittled down to a little above twenty legionaries when we interrupted the melee. Hunter was whirling among them, deftly slapping down shields and puncturing throats, while the four remaining Callowan soldiers had formed a loose wedge around Conjurer to protect him while he casted. The mage hero was the closest to us, and the first to notice we'd arrived.

"Hunter," he screamed, voice going up several octaves in panic. "The Squire caught up!"

Masego hissed out an incantation and stomped the ground, the street's pavestones rippling like water until they turned into a wave that toppled the Conjurer and scattered his escort like rag dolls. Someone was done fucking around, apparently. My soldiers yelled triumphantly at the sight of my arrival, a few cries of "Fifteenth, Fifteenth!" ringing as they threw themselves at Hunter with renewed vigour. Hakram and I pushed forward, ignoring the Conjurer – my adjutant slowed to calmly plunge his sword through the eye socket of a fallen enemy soldier before catching up, the two of us impacting the hero at the same time. Taking two shields to the chest wasn't enough to knock him down: he rolled with the force, flipping and landing on his feet as he slapped down the shaft towards my neck.

My shield forced back the spear but it didn't slow him down. Hunter took a quick bound to the side, circling around Hakram and ramming his weapon into my adjutant's foot. Whatever his spear's head was made of, though, it wasn't sharp enough to punch through steel plate: all the hero got to show for his strike was the grinding sound of metal on metal. A legionary came from behind and forced him towards us with a strike aimed at his back, failing to draw blood but succeeding in putting him off balance. Just the kind of opening I'd been hoping for. Hunter ducked under my arming sword's swing but I came back to slam the pommel of my sword on the top of his head. He groaned in pain and for his troubles I landed an armoured kick straight onto his abdomen, feeling a rib give.

On a regular opponent that would have earned me the time to place a killing blow, but heroes were made of sterner stuff – he

twirled on himself, the bottom of his spear landing a blow on my leg that knocked me off balance. With a curse I dropped to one knee, but my countless hours of training had not been wasted. When the tip of the spear came for my throat my shield was already up. Hakram growled and pushed him back, following the shield bash with a quick thrust to the exposed stomach. He scored blood but the wound was shallow and the hero's retaliation brutal: both hands gripping the spear, he rammed the wood into my officer's nose. Hakram rocked back with a roar and the smooth thrust that came a moment later would have passed through the roof of his mouth if I hadn't slapped it down with my sword at the last moment. *When you back a hero into a corner, Black's voice reminded me, do not under any circumstances let the fight drag on. The more desperate the situation, the more dangerous they become.*

"Steady, adjutant," I spoke. "Steady and careful."

"It's like trying to strangle an eel," the orc cursed, but he backed away and moved to flank our opponent.

"Cohm a' me, foos," Hunter laughed, twirling his spear flashily.

There was a joke in there, but this was neither the time nor the place. Before I could get back on the offensive, Masego yelled out a warning from behind us – I ducked just in time to avoid the Conjuror floating through the air and screaming at the top of his lungs, the pale hairy legs revealed by the earlier cut robes twitching like a dying spider's. Less amusingly, one of his eyes and the same cheek had turned into a black, shrivelled mess. *Yeah, Apprentice isn't pulling his punches anymore.* He landed right in the middle of my legionaries and then whatever spell was holding him blew, a blast of transparent sorcery smacking them away with a sound like a thunderclap. Unfortunately for Hunter, the edge of that detonation caught him. He took a half-step forward, somehow managing to stay on his feet, but I was already moving.

My blade flashed as it came for his neck, and though he brought up his hand to shield it I cut straight through the bone. Blood sprayed everywhere as it flopped lifelessly to the ground, splashing my face, but through squinting eyes I adjusted my aim and prepared to finish the job. There were only so many hands he could sacrifice to save his neck, and his stock was fast running out.

The only warning I got was an itch between my shoulder blades.

I hesitated for a heartbeat, almost deciding to finish Hunter anyway, and then began to turn. It saved my life: the arrow punched through the plate less than an inch away from the spine. I bit down on a scream as a cloaked figure on a rooftop across the street calmly notched another arrow.

"APPRENTICE," I howled. "ARCHER ON THE ROOF."

A heartbeat later a fireball exploded just short of the newcomer but it wasn't Masego's work: my legionaries had finally caught up to us and Kilian's mages deployed behind the shields of half her line with grim professionalism, the Senior Mage herself flinging a bolt of lightning that knocked the archer off the roof and into an alley. Out of sight for now, but I wouldn't bet on that being the last I'd see of them. There was, I noted, no sign of Robber and his sappers. Had they taken another route? *Weeping Heavens, Robber, now isn't the time to get fancy on me.* I pushed down the surge of relief I felt at the appearance of my reinforcements. The Swordsman wouldn't have sent only one person to pick up his waylaid lackeys. I was proved unpleasantly right when a short-haired woman in leather armour jumped off another roof onto Hakram's back. The tall orc managed to catch her hand before she placed a dagger into his neck, but he had to drop his sword for it.

I'd barely taken a step in their direction when two dozen soldiers armed with swords and shields of the same make as those we'd fought inside the palace charged out of cover, taking the barricade legionaries flatfooted. They were facing the other way and some of them had just gotten back on their feet from the Conjuror's aggressively harmful brand of failure. *Shit.* I just needed to kill Hunter and – I swung for the hero's head, but it was already too late. A longsword parried the blow effortlessly and vivid green eyes stared me down.

"Squire," the Lone Swordsman smiled unpleasantly. "I was hoping I'd run into you."

I had something properly scathing on the tip of my tongue but before I could spit it out I was interrupted by the sound of a badly-strung lute going *dun-dun-DUN*. Both the Swordsman and I turned towards the source of it: on the same rooftop the leather girl had jumped from, the Wayward Bard was sitting dangling her feet off the ledge. She shrugged at our incredulous looks.

"I will not apologize for *art*, you Callowan hicks," she declared proudly.

"Do you even have a weapon?" I asked in a pained voice.

She fished out a bottle of a bag at her side and popped the cork off without ever taking her other hand off the lute.

"I can dish out some pretty brutal putdowns if I feel like it," she mused. "Does that count?"

It was a deeply disquieting thing to feel sympathy for the Lone Swordsman and I did not care for it. A triumphant shout behind me shook me out of the daze, an invisible force pulling the short-

haired woman off Hakram that was likely Apprentice's work. A sliver of cold went up my spine. While I'd been bantering my people had been fighting for their lives, dying. How could I have lost sight of that for even a moment? *Gods. Just because she doesn't have a sword doesn't mean she's not dangerous.* All the heroes were accounted for, a voice in the back of my head noted. The Lone Swordsman, the Hunter, the Conjurer, the Bard and either the woman who'd shot me or the one who'd almost killed Hakram was a Thief of some sort. *Well, this whole situation has gone to the deepest Hells in a hurry.* Five Names to an optimistic two and a half was going to be butchery, even if my legionaries outnumbered the enemy.

Hunter wasn't even out of the fight, to my dismay. He'd tied some cloth around his stump and though whatever portion of his body hadn't been burned earlier was unhealthily pale he still stood, leaning heavily on his spear. He wouldn't be as much of a threat, crippled as he was, but handling two heroes simultaneously was bound to be a rough business. William alone would be pain, though given the brutal fighting drills Captain had put me through I was confident I could handle him. I took a deep breath, steadied my stance and brought up my shield. The arrowhead wiggled painfully in my back but I forced a straight face through the dagger-like sting. If that bastard thought outmanning me in Names meant I was going to roll over and take it, he was in for an unpleasant surprise. I just needed to keep this party going for long enough for reinforcements to start piling up: Commander Hune was bound to have noticed one of the barricades had been attacked by now, and she should be mobilizing massive amounts of legionaries to come overwhelm the heroes.

"How are we doing, Hakram?" I called out.

"All my organs are still on the inside," my adjutant replied. "I've had worse. I, er, don't know if you've noticed, sir, but you got shot."

"Happens more often than you'd think," I replied through gritted teeth. "Try not to get yourself killed, Adjutant, I'm sure as Hells not handling the paperwork for this on my own."

"Touching," William sneered. "You have a pet. Thief, take care of that thing."

"If our walking disaster manages to keep their mage busy, it should be doable," the short-haired woman replied, tone amused. "You up for another round, big guy? I've still got an itch to scratch."

"I'm not really comfortable with the slant you're putting on this fight," Hakram admitted, tone alarmed.

Hunter put an end to the banter by lunging for me. I ducked the spear thrust and spun around him, sweeping his feet with my own in a move Black had taught me. I didn't even try to finish him off when he was down, the memory of the Swordsman's unnatural swiftness still fresh in my mind even the better part of a year later. William, it seemed, was not particularly concerned by the Rule of Three: when his abomination of a sword came at me, it was headed for my neck. I cautiously stepped out of the blow's path instead of blocking with my shield. The last time that thing had kissed goblin steel, the steel had been the thing to give way. It was one of the reasons I'd made such a point out of sparring with Captain, since only an idiot would try to block the gargantuan woman's hammer. The reach was different and William was quicker with his strikes, but the underlying principles remained the same – I cautiously gave ground when the Swordsman pushed his attack, circling around to get a better angle.

"You've gotten better," the hero noted. "But not quite good enough."

His blade lit up like a star and he swung at me, the very air shrieking as a wave of blinding power tore in my direction. Too wide to dodge, I knew, so I hunkered behind my shield and took it head on. It was like getting kicked by a horse and swallowing a brightstick at the same time. The impact sent me flying, but that wasn't the worst of it: it felt like I was... burning alive, like in the moment the power had hit me I'd been dropped in a bonfire that was just sentient enough to despise my very existence. I rasped out a breath from where I lay on the ground and scrabbled back to my feet, still half-blind and unsure how long had passed since I'd been hit.

A flicker at the edge of my vision told me Hunter was back and at it, clipping the edge of my shoulder pad with his spear but skimming off when I adjusted my stance. I tried to bash his face in but I couldn't *aim* like this and struck nothing. Another flicker, this time from my left, and my shield was the only thing that prevented me losing an arm: William's blade cut through the metal and nearly reached my fingers under it before he flicked the blade out with a flourish of the wrist. I could see them now, the both of them, my vision slowly returning. They approached me slowly but surely, taking their time in all their cocksure assurance that this was a done deal. That I was outmatched, hopelessly out of my league. They were right, of course. But we were far, far from done.

I smiled a devil's smile and my Name *howled*, raging at the Struggle ahead of me.

"You wanna go, Swordsman?" I laughed, veins flooding with power. "Let's go, then."

Chapter 10: Release

"Did you really think I wouldn't cheat just because I was already winning?"

-

"Oh? Things are about to-" the Bard started, but I interrupted.

"Shut up," I Spoke, and wasn't watching her mouth snap shut the most satisfying thing I'd seen all week?

The heroine tried to open her mouth, struggling in vain against the compulsion. That should take care of that, at least for a little while. The Hunter charged for me again but he was moving so very *slowly* – I stepped around the spear into his guard and opened him up from belly to throat with a single cut, letting him fall with a scream behind me as I stepped towards William without missing a beat. In the background Apprentice and the Conjuror had begun their magical duel anew, lights and shaped elements flying back and forth as the hero steadily lost ground. Things turned sour for the twit even worse when Kilian's mages started pitching in, a staggered flow of fireballs disrupting his casting and forcing him onto the defensive. They were adapting the rate of fire Legion doctrine taught to deal with dug in targets, barely a heartbeat passing between every strike. The mages would run out of juice in time, but hopefully by then Masego would have closed the deal. There were only so many times the Conjuror could bumble his way out of defeat: no Role could stave off death indefinitely.

Hakram was keeping his opponent at bay by the skin of his teeth, collecting cuts but no wounds of any great import. His training was playing against him here: he'd never been taught to fight as a Named and legionaries were expected to kill in properly ordered ranks. Duels weren't taught in the War College, and that was one of the reasons the remnants of the barricade legionaries were getting mauled by enemy soldiers. That they'd been caught flat-footed and dispersed didn't help, sure, but when it came down to it Callowan swordsmen were just better at fighting out of formation. In a contest of shield walls the Empire would win nine times out of ten, but chaotic melees were a poor fit for a stabbing short sword and unwieldy tower shield. *Warriors against soldiers. They won't last much longer.* Didn't matter: ultimately, all the other fights were sideshows. Black had always stressed that the place of a Named on the battlefield was to find the fulcrum, the tipping point, and then to yank that lever as hard as you could.

For tonight's battle, there was no denying that the fulcrum was my duel with the Lone Swordsman.

"I think this one will go a little differently. I'm not half dead this time," I told William, casting away the wreck of my shield.

The dark-haired man smiled. "Night's still young," he replied.

As someone who got into pissing contests with alarming regularity, I could admire a good line like that. As the Squire in charge of a city the bastard had been busy putting to the torch, I fully intended on making him eat the words along with a mouthful of dirt while I buried him alive. I raised my now-free hand and strands of shadow wove themselves around it, forming a wicked-looking spear. I tossed it at William with a grunt, aiming for his abdomen, but the green-eyed hero raised an insultingly skeptical eyebrow. His sword came down and slapped the projectile to the side, where it dug into the pavestones with a howl. I hadn't figured out how to make it stop doing that yet. I wasted a heartbeat in surprise, though I really shouldn't have. The spear trick might have been the most dangerous ranged option in my arsenal, but I'd already known William's sword was far from a normal one. The whole keening sound whenever it cut someone was a bit of a giveaway. I pushed the thoughts away: Struggle would only raise me up for so long, and if I failed to get a definitive advantage before it was done then I'd be facing a full strength Lone Swordsman while exhausted. That way lay bad things, and not the kind of bad villains worked with. I focused on the power, let out a deep breath and *moved*.

The stone under my feet broke as I barrelled forward towards William. He met me with calm, measured precision. His stance perfect even by the exacting standards of my teacher, he pivoted to let me pass him and struck for the back of my neck. I ducked under it, momentum carrying me in a slide on the stone, and cut at his legs. Pointless, now that he'd traded his leather duster and chainmail for actual plate, but just the force of the blow was enough to throw off his stance. He took a single step back and adjusted so he was facing me as I stood back up. He waited with his sword raised, unhurried. I was the one with a time limit, he could afford to let me go on the offensive and wait for me to make a mistake. I grimaced. For all that I'd stated that this fight would be different than the last one, I'd never had a real confrontation with the Swordsman before. Taking him by surprise when half-dead didn't count, and before that he'd trounced me effortlessly. Both our Roles were related to combat, but there was no denying that he was a better swordsman than I was a swordswoman. *It's in his bloody Name, it shouldn't come as a surprise.*

I probed his guard, hoping for him to move, but he didn't bite. Green eyes remained trained on me, that fucking little smile never leaving his face. My Name snarled at the sight of it and I let the power guide me, following the set of instincts that weren't my own but not someone else's. My arming sword came high,

for his eyes, but he stepped into my guard and our forearms met. Sucker punching was usually what I would have gone for in a situation like that, but with his armour there was no point: I could hit hard and my gauntlets would add that little extra twist, but it wouldn't be enough to damage good plate. Instead I grabbed the back of his head and smashed it into mine, the top of my helmet slamming into his forehead. For once being this short had come in handy. He grunted but pushed me away, slicing at my sword hand without pause – I dropped my sword and caught the handle with the other one, ramming the pommel into his stomach. It wasn't enough: his fist caught me in the jaw and my teeth clattered together painfully. If he'd hit a moment later I might have bitten through my own tongue, I realized with a start.

I used the fear like the fuel it was, weaving my Name into a lesser trick: the blast of dark power erupting from my hand threw him back. Finally, a solid hit. I wasted no time in weaving a few strands into a proper spear that took him right in the chest as he was trying to get up. I'd seen that working punch through plate, but aside from knocking him back again it left him unharmed. Weeping Heavens, what would it take to actually hurt him? Face still serene, William rose and went on the offensive. The flat of my blade slapped the side of his in a display of dexterity that would have been beyond me if not for my Name, carefully avoiding for either blade to bite into the other. I flowed into a cut that would have torn through his forearm if he hadn't kept pace, blade twirling and coming down on the top of my head. I felt the metal give but I mostly managed to step out of the blow, sweat pouring down my back. That had been close. Way, way too close. Another heartbeat and that screwed up sword of his would have hacked straight into my skull.

"I see you're beginning to realize it," William spoke calmly.

He didn't sound like he was gloating or dramatizing, for once. In fact, the moment blades had come out he'd turned into an entirely different man, the frills of his personality falling away to leave only naked steel intent on killing me.

"The Bard was right," he noted. "You have an aspect that serves as an equalizer."

"I'd be a little more worried about that, if I were you," I replied through gritted teeth.

I'd been taught to fight by some of the most dangerous people to ever grace Praes, and they had kept me sharp over the last year. I came for his head again, and there was nothing uncertain about it this time. He needed to die. For all of this to work, he needed to *die*. Darting back and forth around him, I put all the swiftness my Name granted me to work. The moment I stepped out of his field of vision I stepped into his dead angle and went for a crippling blow, but the Swordsman remained unfazed. He might as

well have had eyes in the back of his head, given how easily he seemed to predict my movements.

"That's the thing with Names, Squire," he continued in that same even tone. "An equalizer can put you on even footing with me power-wise, but..."

He took a hand off his sword and caught my wrist with it a moment before my blade went through the back of his neck. I tried to blast him away but a flare of blinding power killed the manifestation of my Name before it could get anywhere.

"... but it doesn't account for *skill*," he finished, and his blade dug deep into my shoulder.

The kick caught me in the stomach a moment later, sending me rolling on the stone with shoulder bleeding. I came to a stop on my back, the now-broken arrow I'd been shot with earlier seeking deeper into my body. I let out a hoarse cry and force myself to get up. *Keep moving, keep fighting*. Hune would have reinforcements coming, I just need to stay alive a little longer.

"You're a decent swordswoman, for someone who can't have been at it more than a year," William admitted casually. "You even seem better at working your Name into the fight than I am."

"I'd blush," I gasped, raising my sword. "But I don't think there's enough blood left to spare."

Heartbeat by heartbeat, my Name's power bled out. And with it went the burst of energy I'd felt, the wall that had prevented me from feeling the pain in my body. My acrobatics had torn something in my leg and all the jumping had wiggled the arrowhead around enough that muscles had been cut into. My shoulder was a bloody mess, and with it went my sword arm. I traded hands with my sword, but I was painfully aware I was much sloppier with my left. Against an opponent of this calibre, I might as well have been waving a stick. Gods, I felt tired. My eyes wanted to close, to let me sink into a sleep where all the pain and throbbing would go away.

"This? This is what I do. I've been learning the sword since I could walk," William said, smiling mirthlessly. "I am not a general, you see. I am not a politician or a scholar. I'm self-aware enough to know I'm not even particularly clever."

It saddened me that I was too tired and sluggish to make something out of that.

"All I'm good for is swinging a sword, Squire," the Lone Swordsman told me, "but sometimes, that's all that's needed."

The blade rose, and a bolt of lightning struck him in the face.

"Would you *shut up* already?" Kilian snarled, strands of energy whirling around her.

William fell to the ground, body wracked with spasms as the redhead continued to pour power into the spell.

"Hakram," she yelled. "Take care of this, she's badly wounded."

My vision was swimming but I recognized my adjutant's silhouette ambling towards the Swordsman.

"Finish him," I croaked. "Quick, before he recovers."

Kilian laid a hand on my shoulder and whispered a few words, frowning when the wound failed to heal.

"I can't do much more than stop the bleeding," she told me.

"The sword," I said. "It's... wrong."

"Preaching to the choir here," she replied as she passed a hand wreathed in a green glow over my wound. "Just looking at it gives me a headache, there's no way that thing is made of metal."

She helped me back to my feet. With a rush of panic, I saw William was already on his, sidestepping Hakram's blows effortlessly. Fucking Hells, what would it take to put the man down? I knew heroes were more durable than most, but this was ridiculous. I frowned as a thought suddenly struck me.

"If Hakram's here, where's the Thief?" I asked.

"She disappeared after he punched her in the face," the redhead snorted. "I guess she's not the fighting type."

"So to speak," an amused voice acknowledged from behind her.

The short-haired woman appeared out of thin air, dagger in hand aimed at Kilian's back. No. I tried to push the redhead down but I knew before moving that I'd be too slow and *no*.

"None of that," Masego growled, snapping a hand in our direction.

An invisible force yanked the Thief back in the air, her eyes widening in fear and surprise as she continued to gather speed until the spell threw her through the window of a house on the other side of the street. The bespectacled boy winked in my direction before contemptuously slapping aside a fireball sent in his direction by the Conjuror who was still, against all odds, standing. The patches of darkened skin had spread over most of his face by now, though his other eye remained untouched.

"Kilian, go back to your line," I spoke urgently.

"I hear that," she muttered, face pale.

Coming that close to death had a way of shaking people. Well, sane people anyway. The jury was still out on whether I qualified for that. She smiled at me and opened her mouth to speak, I followed her eyes and saw William casually rip up his sword, tearing his way through Hakram's chest and taking a hand with it.

"No," I screamed, already running. "Not Hakram, you son of a bitch."

The Swordsman spared me a glance, face expressionless.

"Let's get this over with," he spoke.

He should have known better by now. The chariot barrelled through the sky at breakneck speeds, the two pitch-black winged horses pulling it running the hero over with almost inappropriate enthusiasm. The wooden wheels creaked as they rolled over him, breaking bones, and Warlock put down the reins casually, pulling at his gloves.

"Well," the Sovereign of the Red Skies said, "this is a mess. It used to be such a nice city and now there's blood everywhere. Think of the resale value, children."

"You're late," I called out, relief slumping my shoulders.

The older Soninke raised an eyebrow. "There was this-" he paused as Conjurer sent a column of fire in his direction.

With a put-on sigh he wiggled his hand and the spell redirected to his left, looping behind him and coming out as a flock of crows made of fire. They lost none of their momentum and flew to the other side of the street, where they caught Thief in the chest as she crawled out of the house's wreckage. The explosion threw her back out of sight.

"Fire," Warlock finished. "Just a moment, Catherine."

Conjurer was already casting, but the Calamity lazily pointed a finger in his direction.

"Boom," was all he said.

A perfectly symmetrical charred hole appeared in the middle of the hero's forehead, and a heartbeat later his skull imploded. A shiver of dread went up my spine when the body dropped and I saw that the house behind the Conjurer was also a burning wreck.

"Now," Warlock said calmly. "Who's the rascal responsible for all this arson?"

The chariot flipped over, the Calamity almost losing his footing before landing on his feet and brushing away a few flecks of ash.

"That would be me," William grunted. "Finally, villain, you crawl out of your hole."

"Mind your manners, boy," the dark-skinned man replied. "It will do wonders for your life expectancy."

The Lone Swordsman smiled. "You should worry more about yours. Now!"

He brought down his hand in a sharp gesture. I started moving towards them, but nothing happened.

"Was that a bluff?" I asked as I slowed down, a little puzzled. "Because we're pretty much past that phase of the fight."

A shape emerged from one of the rooftops. Not a human, I saw. One goblin, drenched in blood from head to toe.

"Boss," Robber saluted. "Sorry for the wait, ran into some shady Thieves' Guild folks. Lots of bows, skulking around rooftops, you know the type. I'm happy to report we stabbed everything until it stopped moving, just like you taught us!"

"I didn't teach you that," I replied automatically. "Don't implicate me in your future crimes."

William's face dropped, as well it should. Hunter was a gory mess on the ground, and while I suspected he might not be entirely dead he was done for the night. Conjurer had just been served the Calamity special and Thief had just taken a second hit in the face. The Bard was – my eyes turned to the rooftop where she'd been, finding it empty. *Oh, that could be trouble.* Regardless, the enemy soldiers had killed through the rest of the barricade legionaries only to get wrecked by Kilian's line, if the scorch marks were any indication. The amount of casualties left a foul taste in my mouth but it could have been much, much worse.

"Doesn't matter," the Lone Swordsman finally said. "Maybe it was always supposed to be this way. Just me and the monster."

"You're about forty years too early to take a crack at me, boy," Warlock sighed. "For one, an older hero would have known not to give me all this time to cast."

He snapped his fingers and William flipped, something dragging him up by his feet. He snarled and his sword lit up, but Warlock frowned and the glow winked out.

"A nasty piece of work," the Calamity acknowledged as he levitated it away from the hero's grasp "but I've handled nastier."

"Permission to make a joke about your sex life, sir?" Robber called out.

"Denied," I interrupted.

The Soninke cast an amused look at my tribune before turning his attention to me.

"You'll have to kill him yourself, of course," he said, "but there's no reason we can't put him on ice until we can arrange that in a more controlled setting."

"Nah, that's not gonna happen," a voice called out.

The Wandering Bard sauntered onto the scene, undaunted by the fact that my legionaries immediately formed a circle around her. Warlock frowned.

"A Bard," he spoke with distaste. "By far the most irritating type of Name ever inflicted upon us by Creation." He paused. "On the other hand, I *have* been meaning to dissect one of those. I thank you for the sacrifice you've volunteered to undertake on behalf of the Empire."

"That got personal *really* quickly," Almorava announced. "But as I was saying, we're totally going to escape. We got our asses kicked, so William needs to go all brooding for a while so he can pull his shit together before the third fight and lead our little band of misfits to a last minute victory."

I opened my mouth but she raised a hand.

"I get it, things aren't ideal what with Conjurer having gone all esplody and Hunter doing his best imitation of a pile of fresh pork chops. But come on, any team with a woman as outrageously beautiful as me on it is basically mandated by the Heavens to win."

"The only thing outrageous about you is the size of that nose," I muttered.

The Bard gasped. "That actually hurt my feelings a little," she admitted. "Now I don't even feel guilty for threatening you guys."

Warlock drummed his fingers against his leg impatiently. "Do get on with it. Exactly why shouldn't I put you in a block of ice and have Masego buy a very reliable set of gags?"

"Right," the Bard said, shaking herself. "So when that whole tower ward went down, I took whatever power you didn't sink into you and shoved it in a bottle. Think sharper multiplied by about a thousand."

She fished a bottle out of her knapsack and presented it triumphantly. I squinted.

"That's a half-empty bottle of rum," I told her.

Apparently my waitressing days *could* come in useful, who knew?

"That's embarrassing," Almorava admitted, not looking in the least embarrassed. She took out another bottle, this one emitting an ominous blue glow.

Shit. She hadn't been lying. Warlock cocked his head to the side.

"Are you trying to bluff me with a bottle full of common Callowan sprites?" he asked incredulously.

The Bard cursed. "All right," she replied. "So that could have gone better. I'll admit, the plan still has some kinks to work out. But that's okay! I was just a distraction."

The arrow took Warlock in the shoulder. The Calamity barely blinked before turning in the direction it had come from – before I could even see what was there, half the rooftop was on fire. A single silhouette fell off, trying to smother the flames. A handful of smokers blew around William, but by the time Masego dispersed the smoke with a gust of wind there was no trace of the Lone Swordsman. I didn't even bother looking for the Bard: she would have disappeared the moment we'd stopped looking at her. It was my turn to curse.

"Mages, see to the wounded," I called out. "The rest of you, secure the archer. And someone check if the Hunter's still alive."

They snapped to it. I headed for Hakram immediately, pleased to see Masego was already taking care of him. The orc looked paler than usual, and it was disturbing to see an orc his size looking so... frail.

"You'll be all right, Hakram," I spoke, kneeling next to him. "You're in no danger of dying."

"Well," my adjutant replied, "I suppose my clapping days are over. Good thing I was never much of a theatre enthusiast."

I nearly jumped out of my skin when a hand came to rest on my shoulder. It was Warlock. The touch made me uncomfortable, but after he'd pulled our asses out of the fire I suppose I should grit my teeth and take it without comment.

"We won't be able to reattach the hand, child," the Calamity said. "Things cut by that sword remain so, as your leader well knows."

I absently traced the length of the long scar across my chest hidden by my armour. A good thing I'd never been particularly vain about my looks, as it was pretty disfiguring.

"That said," Warlock spoke with an interested glint in his eye, absently ripping the arrow out of his shoulder, "some interesting discoveries have been made in the area of magical prosthesis, these last few years."

A real grin split my adjutant's face.

"I'm listening," he said.

Chapter 11: Report

"Note: those meddling heroes keep surviving getting thrown off cliffs. Must build taller ones in anticipation of the next encounter."

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

There was something morbidly fascinating about watching Hakram's new hand move.

The naked bones were just as dextrous as when they'd been hidden under my adjutant's flesh and muscle, though they were now animated by necromancy instead of more natural means. He got no sensation from the skeleton hand, he'd told me, though he could roughly gauge how much pressure he was putting on something when holding it. I could feel the threads of magic that kept it moving according to his will, feel how they dug into his body and used his soul as fuel to maintain the enchantment. I was fairly sure I could tie my own threads to puppet the bones if I tried, which meant any decent necromancer could likely do the same. Not a great worry considering not even antiheroes like the Swordsman would be caught dead with anyone that dealt with the dead, but somewhere down the line Heiress might get it into her head to pull something. I'd have to ask Apprentice if anything could be done about it. Hakram followed closely behind me as we strode through the main avenue of the Fifteenth's camp, absent-mindedly returning salutes from legionaries as we did so.

"A whole company," I finally sighed. "And that's just the ones we caught."

The tall orc grimaced. "A sad day when we lose more legionaries to desertion than a run-in with heroes."

When the dust had settled, Juniper had slapped down a report on my desk that had taken the taste of victory, however slight, right out of my mouth. While the soldiers under Commander Hune had been keeping the city from exploding into revolt, almost two companies' worth of Callowan recruits had taken advantage of the

chaos to escape into the countryside. Nauk had kept a lid on the situation as best he could and his patrols had managed to corral about half of the deserters into a prisoner camp, but the aftermath of that mess was a logistical nightmare. Juniper and I had made a point out of spreading out my countrymen across as many lines as possible to avoid the formation of Praesi and Callowan cliques in the ranks, That measure had failed spectacularly and now half the lines in Nauk's *kabili* were missing one or two recruits, forcing a never-ending nightmare of transfers to fill the gaps. That we were adjusting our ranks and the most basic unit level right before heading into an active theatre of war had both Juniper and I in a dark mood: we couldn't linger in Summerholm much longer, but neither could we go tangle with the rebels half-cocked.

The last news had the Silver Spears digging deep into General Istrid's supply line until Captain and the Blackguards drove them off. Countess Marchford had intensified skirmishes all over the front, sending packs of barely-armed peasant conscripts to burn the fields between Vale and the Legions of Terror to deny General Sacker foraging when she advanced. The Empire wasn't losing by any stretch of the situation – if anything, that the Countess had seen fit to burn some of the best farmland in Callow proved that much – but neither was it *winning*. And the longer the rebels were loose, the further talk of revolt would spread. Black knew that better than I, so I had no idea why he'd yet to pull away another pair of legions from border duty to flank the enemy. There must have been angles at play I couldn't see. Regardless, the Fifteenth needed to get into the fight yesterday and all the *fucking deserters* were costing me time. The only upside to this I could see was that all our Callowan recruits who intended to pull a runner likely already had. That a full fifth of my countrymen's numbers in the Fifteenth had tried to disappear into the wilds at the first occasion was incredibly galling, but in some ways I should have expected it. The overwhelming majority of the deserters had been gallows recruits, criminals given a choice between the noose and five years of service in the Legions.

Which also meant that there were about one hundred hardened criminals with legionary training loose in western Callow, but for now that wasn't my problem. General Afolabi was the one who'd have to keep the region together after we joined the front and I wished him luck with the task. He'd been dropping hints for the last few days that the Fifteenth's presence in Summerholm was disruptive to civil order, and while he wasn't wrong it still irritated me that after I'd pulled his ass out of the fire the Soninke was trying to shoo me away. *Juniper warned me that by acting this high-handed I wouldn't be making any friends.* Fuck it, if he couldn't deal with me taking charge to put an end to the mess he'd allowed to fester I would likely had ended up making an enemy out of him down the line. He was near the bottom of the pecking order when it came to the Empire's generals,

anyway: he was the most junior among them and one of the least trusted by the Tower.

"It's a risk, Catherine," my adjutant gravelled. "I won't deny if it works they'll be useful, but if it fails..."

"It'll hurt my credibility with the ranks," I acknowledged sourly.

My age had been surprisingly little of an issue when it came getting my authority respected: I supposed I had centuries of young heroes and villains leading armies to thank for that. Besides, according to the census I'd had taken there was not a single of my legionaries older than twenty-five. Which was troubling, in and of itself. Not so much that I had no veterans to advise me, though Juniper had expressed private misgivings about that, but that if I'd been able to arrange this as it currently was I would have. This would not be the last war I'd be involved in, and having the core of the Fifteenth following me from the beginning of my career would only encourage them to obey my own orders over those of the Tower further down the line. Once again, Black knew this. And yet he had arranged it. More than that, nearly half my soldiers were from Callow. My teacher was making this easy on me, and he wasn't in the habit of giving me unnecessary advantages.

If anything, he was a firm believer in hobbling me so I'd learn to deal with problems from a position of weakness. *So what's your game, oh teacher of mine?* No point in thinking too long about it right now. Black's mind was a labyrinth of vicious cleverness on the best of days. Besides, for all that the deck had been stacked in my favour when it came down to it I had yet to acquire the trust of the rank and file of the Fifteenth. My age and lack of experience might not have been divisive issues but my birth certainly was. Even having a Name and the tutelage of a Calamity could only get me so far. If I screwed up, if I made an obvious mistake that could be attributed to Callowan sympathies... That concern had made deciding the fate of those one hundred imprisoned deserters a godsdamned thorn in my side. Juniper had argued for crucifying the lot of them and putting them up on the ramparts of Summerholm as a warning for the rest, but that wouldn't solve anything.

I was also, to be frank, a lot less sanguine than my Legate at the idea of casually ordering a hundred gruesome deaths. And yet, I couldn't just reintegrate them in the ranks. There was no guarantee they wouldn't run again given the chance and I'd have a mutiny on my hands if they got off without punishment. Besides, there was a difference between not wanting the lot to die a brutal death spread over several days and wanting them to get off easy. I had little sympathy for the bastards: while the rest of my soldiers had been doing their jobs and dying in the line of

duty they'd tried to *flee*. The cowardice was revolting, regardless of the circumstances of their enrolment.

I was still in a foul mood when we arrived at the open clearing where the deserters had been herded, forced to kneel and surrounded by twice their number in loyal legionaries. They'd been disarmed and divested of their armour, of course. No point in taking unnecessary risks. I strode past them towards the wooden crate my adjutant had installed in anticipation my address, the both of us ignoring the whispers of "Deadhand" that spread when Hakram was recognized. The orc had acquired something of a reputation, by surviving a fight against not one but *two* heroes with only a lost hand to show for it. I climbed on top of the crate, resenting the absurdity of it but painfully aware that even kneeling some of the prisoners reached up to my chin.

"Silence," I ordered, and the whispers were snatched right out of their mouths.

I resisted the urge to clear my throat, taking a deep breath. Black's lesson on pitching my voice so it could carry far without being a yell had seemed an affectation at the time, but I was glad of them now.

"Military tribunals were convened last night and sentences have been given," I announced.

It felt strange, standing in front of over two hundred people decked out in plate and wreathed in the dark cloak my teacher had gifted me. I felt like a fake, like the fact that I'd been so often making it up as I went along should have been obvious to everyone, but my gaze swept over the prisoners and I saw only fear on their faces. There was something darkly satisfying about that, much as the feeling unsettled me.

"For desertion, low treason and dereliction of duty while the Empire is in a state of war, you have all been condemned to death," I said.

There were a few cries of dismay and some prisoners tried to get up. My temper flared.

"Sit the Hells down," I Spoke, and my voice rang like steel.

As if they'd been struck, the deserters fell back to the ground. So did quite a few of my legionaries, I noted, though since they'd not been the people I addressed the effect of the Speaking on them was much weaker.

"I have been urged to make examples of you," I growled. "To put you up on a hundred crosses as a warning for the next fools tempted to run."

I mastered my irritation and let out a deep breath.

"But that would be a waste. You owe military service to the Tower and I fully intend to collect."

Confusion and a little hope, but most were just wary. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. *As well they should.* It had occurred to me, eventually, that I was trying to solve a Callowan problem through Praesi means. It was the wrong set of tools for the job. The Kingdom of Callow had its own military traditions, more than just the now-disbanded knightly orders. My girlhood hero Elizabeth Alban, the Queen of Blades, had tried to invade the Duchy of Daoine once – though back then it had been an independent kingdom. Well aware that the Watch would inevitably make a butchery of whatever troops she sent in to breach their strongholds, she'd founded a new division in the Callowan host: the Forlorn Hope. Criminals, traitors, deserters – she'd conscripted all the scum at the bottom of the barrel, armed them and sent them first into the grinder at every occasion. *Using the worst of the Kingdom to do the Kingdom's best work*, she'd famously called it. And now here I was, with hard battles ahead of me and a full company of deserters. There were lessons to be learned from the past, if one was willing to look in the right places.

"As of this morning, the Forlorn Hope company has been added to the rolls of the Fifteenth. Congratulations on your reenrolment in the Legions of Terror," I announced. I paused, eyes sweeping across the crowd. "I see some of you are rejoicing. Wipe that smile off of your faces. Make no mistake, deserters: this is not a mercy. I *own* you now."

The words rolled off my tongue easily, coming unprompted now.

"Lawfully you are a dead men and women, all of you. The manner and time of your death is at my discretion, and I intend to use you *sorely* before letting you go."

I allowed a hard smile to stretch my lips.

"Your officers will be Praesi, as they have refrained from disgracing themselves. Their authority over you is absolute: they've been granted the power to carry out your sentence at any time, for any reason they see fit."

That had been the hardest part to implement. Obviously I couldn't use Callowan officers, but finding volunteers to lead soldiers likely to slip a knife in your ribs if they got a chance had been... tricky. Ultimately Juniper had agreed that any officer serving in the Forlorn Hope would get a promotion out of the company after a fixed duration of service. Ambition was not a quality my legionaries lacked, especially those who'd gone through the College. There'd have to be oversight to make sure

that unprecedented amount of power of their soldiers wouldn't be abused, but mentioning as much right now would have been counter-productive to my goals. I needed them scared. But not desperate. If they thought they had nothing to lose, there'd be no telling what they'd do to get out.

"Your situation is not, however, entirely hopeless," I continued. "Should you serve out the remaining years of your term without incident, you will be released and your record wiped clean."

I stared the prisoners down, feeling my Name simmer in approbation under my skin.

"You want to be free? *Earn it.*"

I let the silence that followed my last words remain for a moment, weighing down on them, then sighed.

"Dismissed," I finished.

The guards set to the chore of bringing back the prisoners to their separate camp as I stepped down from my crate, taking Hakram's offered hand. The live one, because I wasn't touching that other one without a damned good reason.

"We'll need to hurry if we don't want to be late," my adjutant reminded me.

"Time to face the music, huh?" I grunted.

It'd been a while since I'd seen my teacher anyway.

—

It was utterly bizarre to stand by a Miezani-style open bath while in full armour, but not as strange as watching a Calamity putter around the cold waters while lighting candles.

Not normal ones, I noted. They were little carved figurines of obsidian covered in runes, and while I could see no wick they were nonetheless burning. I almost asked Masego but he was watching his father work quite intently: apparently he'd never attempted a scrying spell of this particular breed before. Warlock had taken the opportunity of turning our report to Black into a lesson for his son, which was rather thoughtful of him. Hakram shuffled uneasily behind me, nervousness easy to read even on his inhuman face. It was about the teeth, with the orcs: showing the lower part of their fangs without going up to the tips was a sign of agitation, apparently. Or so Captain had told me, and after all those years of working with orcs I figured she'd know. My adjutant had never met Black in person, even back in Ater. That he was now doing so after the entire Comital Palace had been turned into a smoking wreck probably wasn't helping his

nerves. The four city blocs surrounding the western bastion had gone the same way, but thankfully Hune's legionaries had evacuated them in time. There was a little more to it than that, of course: the Black Knight was a big deal, to most orcs. A living legend, even, to those who'd been born after the Conquest and the Reforms. I supposed it wasn't unlike if I'd been able to meet Eleonore Fairfax or Jehan the Wise, had they still alive.

"It will do," Warlock suddenly announced, rising back to his feet and tidying up his robes.

I eyed the circle of candles surrounding the water sceptically.

"I thought the reason most two-way scrying has those little pebbles at the bottom of the bowls was so there's a sympathetic link to ground the spell in? How does this one even work?"

The Soninke raised an eyebrow.

"Do you have a few days for me to grant you a layman's understanding of metaphysical sympathetic effects?" he asked drily.

"Probably not," I admitted.

"Then take my word for it," the still ridiculously handsome older man replied. "Masego, did you commit the pattern to memory?"

"The escapement seems a little weak to me," the bespectacled boy muttered. "I'd have to write down to formula to grasp how it actually works, but reproducing it shouldn't be a problem."

Warlock clicked his tongue against the top of his mouth.

"What do we say about blind imitation, Masego?" he prompted.

Apprentice rolled his eyes. "Sorcery without understanding is a sword without a handle," he dutifully quoted. "I don't know why you're so fond of that saying, Father, you wouldn't be caught dead using an actual sword."

Warlock looked aghast at the very idea. "Only plebs kill with their own hands," he asserted, remembering Hakram and I were still in the room only a moment latter. "No offense," he added, not bothering to inject a great deal of credibility in the appeasement.

"Some taken," I replied honestly.

Masego snorted. His father ignored me and waved a hand, muttering under his breath. The waters rippled, then lit up with an unearthly glow. My teacher's silhouette appeared on the surface, seated by a table and – why wasn't I surprised? – a cup of wine

in hand. It was barely Noon Bell! Praesi drinking habits were downright unwholesome.

"I can't believe you fell for that goblinfire trick, Wekesa," Back spoke amusedly. "We used the exact same one to flush out the Grey Wizard."

Warlock sneered. "If Afolabi, *your* general, had kept a closer eye on his stocks it wouldn't have been an issue. Besides, I'm not the one who toppled Stygia's government while drunk as a lord."

Black threw up his hands in exasperation. "Are you ever going to let that one go?" he replied in irritation. "I got a jug of wine when we traded the donkey, was else was I supposed to do with it? I swear, you're worse with that than Sabah is with the whole dragon affair."

"She's right to hold it over your head," the other Calamity replied with a twitch of the lips. "It was sizing her up for dinner while you haggled over terms."

"It was asking for an absurd amount of goats and you know it," the green-eyed man replied peevishly.

While in my case regular meals in the company of Black and Captain had long disabused me of the notion that living legends were above petty bickering, if the stunned look on Hakram's face was any indication it was a fresh revelation for the orc. I cleared my throat.

"While I'd like to revisit why the Empire would be meddling in one of the Free Cities' internal affairs at some point in the future," I noted, "I think there might be more pressing matters at hand."

And just like that, all traces of amusement slid off the two men's faces. I'd seen it happen in my teacher before, but witnessing the same on a man as amiable as Warlock was a little unsettling.

"Catherine," Black finally bothered to greet me. "I hear you've managed to get the Summerholm situation under control."

"Hello to you too, Uncle Amadeus," Apprentice interrupted, tone a little irked.

"Don't be a brat, Masego," the dark-haired man replied lazily. "The greeting was implied. The same goes for your adjutant, Catherine."

Green eyes turned to Hakram, too considering to be anything close to friendly.

"Hakram Deadhand," he murmured. "Catchy, that. If the story spreads it will accelerate your growth into your Name."

"Sir," the orc replied stiffly, saluting out of reflex.

I winced in embarrassment for him.

"At ease, Adjutant," my teacher replied, kind enough not to voice the amusement I suspected he felt. "This is not an official debriefing; we're merely sharing information. Scribe tells me the Fifteenth managed to take one of the heroes prisoner."

The last sentence was inflected to sound like a question, though everybody in the room knew it wasn't. It was one of Black's more irritating habits to leave sentences hanging as an invitation to elaborate instead of actually asking a question – he did it all the times when we had our evening lessons.

"The Hunter," I grunted. "He survived the wounds only barely, he's been kept in enchanted sleep ever since."

Green eyes turned to Warlock and his eyebrow arched.

"He's from Refuge, I've confirmed it," the older Soninke said and I blinked in surprise.

That was news to *me*. Wasn't Refuge ruled by Ranger? It was an independent polity, sure, but the few times the subject of the other Calamity had come up she'd always been spoken of fondly. That didn't really mesh with heroes trickling into the Empire from there, unless there was a plan in the works.

"One of Hye's pupils," the Knight grimaced. "That's going to be a mess. Malicia will insist on diplomatic sanctions."

"I'm sorry, did I miss something here?" I broke in incredulously. "Because the implication seems to be that a fairly notorious villain was a hero's teacher."

Warlock graced me with an amused look, Black leaned back in his seat.

"Calling Ranger a villain is something of a stretch," my own teacher finally said. "She's not particularly concerned with matters of Good and Evil. Mostly, she does what she feels like doing. We can discuss it more later, Catherine – it's a somewhat complicated issue."

The other Calamity smirked. "You can say that again."

Black's eyes turned cold, for a heartbeat. "Glass houses, Wekesa," he simply said, and Warlock looked abashed for a moment before they smoothly changed the subject.

"You'll need to bring him with you when you join us south," the pale-skinned Named informed me.

I frowned. "That seems like a recipe for a heroic rescue," I told him bluntly.

"The Swordsman lost," Masego disagreed quietly. "You'll have free hand for at least a month."

Black nodded in approval. "By that time we'll have gotten word back from Refuge and found out whether he's been disavowed or not. If so, summary execution. As a matter of fact, if he somehow manages to wake up and attempt an escape you're free to deal with him however you wish. There's limits to our forbearance, even with old friends."

"And if he hasn't been disavowed?" I asked.

Black's smile was perfectly pleasant, and all the more frightening for it.

"Then things will get interesting," was all he said.

"We haven't identified the other prisoner yet," Masego contributed when it became obvious the subject was closed. "We've managed to heal the burns enough to ascertain she's Deoraithe, but she's yet to regain consciousness."

"I might have been a little heavy-handed," Warlock idly admitted. "I forget how fragile people without Names can be."

Black drained the rest of his cup, then set it aside. "Is she from the Watch? Sacker says they've been quiet, but sometimes they slip between the cracks."

"I was waiting on your approval for that," the Soninke replied. "The procedure always has risks, as you well know."

"See if you can get anything out of her when she wakes up," Black ordered. "If not, go ahead with it. And do a bloodline ritual, just in case."

Warlock grinned. "Not going to get on my case for summoning those nasty, nasty devils?" he teased.

"I'm enough of a general to know a lost battle when I see one," the Knight replied sourly.

"So you *can* learn," Warlock mused. "I take it you need the room for the next part of this conversation?"

"If you would," my teacher agreed. "I'll be in touch later this evening regardless."

The dark-skinned nodded, putting his hand over his son's shoulder.

"Come, Masego," he announced carelessly. "The unwashed masses have business to discuss."

"That's funny," Apprentice mused, "you know, considering we're in a-"

The voices faded abruptly as they passed the room's threshold, like they'd been swallowed up. *A protective ward. Hadn't even noticed it.* I still couldn't, even now that I knew it was here, and that bothered me more than a little bit. I knew there were few mages of Warlock's calibre out there, but there were some. A liability to look into, when I next found the time. Hakram made to follow the mages but my teacher spoke up.

"Stay, Adjutant," he ordered. "This concerns you more than Catherine."

The sudden set of the orc's jaw betrayed his concern, but overall he kept his face remarkably calm.

"Warlock's professional opinion is that you're less than a month away from coming into your Name, Hakram Deadhand," Black announced conversationally. "Which means you need to be made aware of the broader concerns regarding it."

"There's going to be pushback," the orc gravelled. "From the more conservative elements in the Empire."

"Pushback is something of an understatement," Black replied. "I expect that the assassination attempts will begin before the end of this campaign."

My fingers closed into a fist at the blunt statement of fact. "They'd try assassinate a Legion officer in the middle of a war?" I spat.

"The nobility sees the outcome of the Rebellion as a foregone conclusion," he noted. "Meanwhile, Adjutant, you personify the very trend they've been spending the last forty years trying to bury."

"I'll take that as a compliment, sir," Hakram muttered.

"You should," Black agreed. "The last orc to have the potential for a Name was Grem One-Eye, boy. You walk in hallowed company."

My officer swallowed loudly, and I couldn't blame him for it.

"Isn't there anything you can do about the assassins?" I asked. "I thought those all answered to the the Tower."

"They'll hire their blades through Mercantis, and short of burning that city down there's not much we can do about that," Black admitted. "Malicia's already suppressing the rumours in Praes and she's put the information under the seal of the Tower – it's illegal to even speak of it at the moment. But those are stopgap measures, Catherine, and there's only so long it will work."

I gritted my teeth. "We've got our hands full enough without dealing with assassins on top of it," I grunted. "There's got to be a way to take care of it."

"There is," Black replied mildly. "Kill them. Brutally, publicly and repeatedly. Eventually they'll decide that assassination isn't a feasible way to remove him from the board and turn to other means."

"Might be simpler to choke that off at the source," I said.

He snorted. "While the thought of cleaning up the political scene of the Empire with a vigorous round of hangings has a certain appeal, we should deal with the open rebellion putting the south of Callow to the torch before starting a civil war."

I recognized the change of subject for the tacit declaration that this particular discussion was over with.

"You've decided where the Fifteenth will be deployed, then?" I asked.

"It's time," he agreed. "You'll link up with us for a few days but split off towards Marchford when we move south to force a battle. It's time for the Silver Spears to be dealt with. Congratulations, Catherine: your first battle will be as an independent detached force."

I grinned. "Best news I've had all week."

Chapter 12: Reproval

"There's a very important difference between a nice man and a good one."

– King Jehan the Wise

So apparently all that was needed to change a rather nice stockroom into something sinister was clearing out the supplies, setting up a stone slab in the centre of it and shackling a prisoner to it. *You learn something every day.* The combination of bare stone and simply-dressed young woman was lending this whole affair a particularly villainous vibe I wasn't really on board with, but I supposed that after getting shot by the Deoraithe once already Warlock wasn't in a gambling mood. Still, if I got

pissy every time someone put an arrow in me I'd have a permanent scowl on my face. Bad form, that.

"I take it Masego won't be joining us?" I asked.

The handsome older man shrugged. "He has no interest in matters like these. Neither do I, frankly, but rank tends to accrue tedious duties."

In a way it was comforting that he was more bored with the coming interrogation than being all creepy-expectant, the way villains usually were in the stories. Warlock had admittedly been nothing but polite to me so far, so I supposed I should have expected a departure from the mould in this too. The dark-skinned mage lay back against the wall and snapped his fingers nonchalantly, the prisoner stirring awake immediately. The archer had woken up a little earlier today, the eve of the furthest I could push back my departure, and promptly been put back to sleep until she could be moved to a more appropriate facility. At least the burns all over the stranger's body had been healed, though sloppily enough that if she tried to move too much it would hurt – not a coincidence, I assumed. Her eyes blinked open, then widened when she realized where she was. There was a single spark of terror before she smothered it, schooling her face into a blank mask. *She's been trained to deal with interrogation*, I noted.

"I am an Imperial citizen being held unlawfully," she spoke up with that odd Daoine burr flavouring her Lower Miezian. "If you do not release me immediately, there will be diplomatic consequences."

"I am shaking in my boots," Warlock replied drily.

I sighed. "You were caught participating in the activities of a group that's been convicted of high treason and seen attempting the murder of a member of the Dark Council," I told her. "Both of those fetch the death penalty, and not one of those nice quick ones. You're not going anywhere."

She glared at Warlock before turning her stare to me, eyes lingering on my own obviously Deoraithe features. She said something in the Old Tongue, the scathing tone obvious regardless of the language barrier.

"I don't actually speak that, except for a few curses," I informed her.

"Probably best you don't," Warlock mused. "And you should be ashamed of yourself, young lady – I'm sure her mother was a perfectly nice woman."

Whether the prisoner had actually insulted whoever had given birth to me was up in the air, as far as I was concerned: I

wouldn't put it above the Soninke to yank my chain for the sake of his own amusement. Still, if she'd wanted to hit a nerve then parents weren't really the way to go for me. I was perfectly fine with having no idea who my progenitors were – parents were more of an abstract concept for me than anything else. If anything the closest thing I'd ever had to a father figure was Black, and wasn't that a terrifying thought?

"Arch-traitor," the prisoner spat in my direction. "I know who you are, Catherine of Laure."

I rolled my eyes. I'd already gotten this speech from William, and he'd delivered it better.

"I'm not in the mood for this particular debate," I replied, "so let's shelve the subject for now. Do you have a name?"

She glared at me. *Eh, I've had better*, I thought. *That's barely a coercing-Morok level of spite.*

"Why would I give you anything, *uraind*?" she sneered.

"It'll make this conversation a lot easier if I can refer to you as something else than "prisoner" or "you"," I told her honestly.

"I could rip it out of your mind, of course, but that tends to make a mess," Warlock spoke idly. "Delicate thing, the human mind. Not telling what might break when I go fishing for what I want."

She held up admirably under the threat, her face betraying no sign of fear, but the way she'd gone still revealed exactly how terrified she was at the prospect. It sickened me a little to see it. Not at her for being afraid, but at myself for being part of the people inflicting that fear. I'd enjoyed putting the fear of me in my enemies before but that had been on the field, where we both had weapons. Not when they were chained in a dark room underground, trapped in a room with one of the greatest living monsters of the Empire and the apprentice of another one. *But that's a child's way of seeing things, isn't it? If you're so insecure about your objectives that you feel the need to give the enemy a fair shot at you, then maybe you shouldn't be fighting at all.* It was not a game for the meek I was learning to play. I knew that, but it did not take away the sick feeling in my stomach.

"Breagach," the woman said. "That is all you will get."

"Cute," Warlock commented. "Lying, is it? I didn't think the Watch was that self-indulgent."

I made a mental note to pick up a language primer on the Old Tongue before leaving Summerholm. Or, more realistically, tell

Hakram to pick up one for me. I disliked missing context, and I'd gotten better at using my learning aspect anyway. Within a month or two I should be able to speak the basics and understand the rest.

"I am not part of the Watch," Breagach replied calmly. "A typical southerner assumption, to believe that any Deoraithe leaving the Duchy belongs to it."

"Well, let's find out if that's your first lie of the day," Warlock smiled.

A dozen bars of red light came into being above the Deoraithe, connected by threads of gold. Breagach drew a breath in panic and struggled against her bindings but she was nowhere strong enough to burst through good goblin steel.

"Do stop fighting it, it won't be painful if you remain calm," Warlock spoke absent-mindedly. "Interesting breed you are, members of the Watch. Took me a while to figure out what made you tick."

"They're still regular humans, aren't they?" I frowned.

"When I first cut one open I found there was no physical difference to a regular Deoraithe," Warlock agreed. "Which is fascinating, given what they can actually do. I theorized the modifications regressed upon death – which, while an advanced piece of sorcery, is not impossible. Besides, their little club has existed for over a millennium in one form or another."

I got the feeling I wasn't going to like what followed.

"Grem was kind enough to secure me a live specimen, but a living dissection yielded the same results," the Calamity continued in that same casual tone.

I was glad he was facing away from me, unable to see the disgust on my face. My fingers clenched and unclenched, but I bit my tongue. I had no authority over the man, and making a fuss now wasn't going to bring anyone back to life.

"It was Amadeus that put me on the right track, ultimately," Warlock said. "When trying to understand someone look at their enemies, he told me. He's a font of useless sayings like that, but now and then they do come in useful. Who do the Deoraithe hate more than anyone?"

Breagach let out a hoarse cry, then collapsed in exhaustion against the stone.

"The elves," the dark-skinned man finished. "Oh, how you despise those isolationist little bastards. Can't say I blame you – even

the other Good types can't stand them. Regardless, their entire species adds more weight to their presence in the Pattern the longer they live. From there, it was a natural leap to start examining your souls."

The red bars dropped down into the stone, digging into it, and the cords of gold thickened until they formed a ridge not unlike a painting's frame. No, I realized as the golden magic spread to fill in the circle. Not a painting, a lens. There were arcane runes forming and dissipating across the surface, though I did not know their meaning. Warlock clicked his tongue against the top his mouth.

"Bad habit, lying," he commented. "Though it's interesting you've only taken the first three Oaths: they don't usually send out anyone without at least five under their belt."

I frowned. "She's tinkered with her soul?" I asked. "That seems incredibly dangerous."

"It would be more accurate to say they bind their souls to a source of power – one I've yet to identify," Warlock explained. "They use rituals called "Oaths" to tap into it according to set patterns. Night vision, accelerated reflexes, superior endurance and even an extended lifespan."

My frown deepened. "Not the Gods, surely?"

The dark-skinned man snorted. "A little above their reach, that. It's not one of the angelic Choirs either, or anything demonic. My best guess is a nature spirit of some sort."

"There are things in this land older than you could hope to conceive," Breagach gasped.

"They always say that," Warlock mocked. "Oh, our spirit guardian is beyond your comprehension! Its power is unrivalled, tremble and flee!"

The second part was spoken in one of the worst imitations of the Callowan accent I'd ever heard.

"There's a difference between Gods and gods, child," the Calamity murmured, "and I've more than a few of the latter's corpses in my laboratory."

A shiver went up my spine at the words. Maybe if he'd sounded like he was boasting I'd have dismissed the claim, but he sounded so... matter-of-fact. Like there was nothing particularly unusual about taking apart literal forces of nature to see how they worked. *Monster*, I reminded myself. *Polite and charming, but still a monster.*

"Anyhow," the mage shrugged, "We have what we need. The Watch answers directly to Duchess Kegan, meaning she knowingly broke the terms of her client state treaty with the Tower."

There wouldn't be war over this, I knew. The Empire wouldn't open a second front in the war over such a small incident. But there would be consequences.

"The tribute this year is going to be particularly expensive, I think," I murmured.

"Politics," Warlock dismissed, tone uninterested. The magic over the prisoner winked out a moment later. "That's what Black and Malicia are for."

He turned his eyes to Breagach, who while visibly tired was still awake enough to look at us with undisguised loathing.

"And you, my dear, are going back to sleep," he continued mildly, raising a hand.

"Stop," I said.

The stare the Calamity graced me with was mild, but I still had to stop myself from reaching for my sword.

"Black mentioned a bloodline ritual," I said.

"We already know she's Watch," Warlock replied impatiently. "I tire of wasting time on this affair."

"You said it was odd she's only taken three of the Oaths," I pointed out, mind slowly catching up to what my instincts had latched on. "If she was deployed even though she's not fully trained, there's a reason for it."

"And you think a bloodline ritual will explain that?" the mage replied sceptically, though at least I had his full attention now.

"If I were sending a representative into a war, it'd be someone I knew I could trust," I grunted.

The Calamity's eyes narrowed. Ah, he'd gotten it. For all his flaws, the man was clever.

"And who can you trust more than your own blood?" he finished in a murmur, turning calculating eyes towards Breagach.

She'd gone still again. Warlock tapped a finger against his belt and a previously invisible sigil lit up, dropping a slim knife into his palm.

"Blood magic," I spoke flatly, not bothering to hide my disapproval.

"Get over yourself, girl," he replied in the same tone. "The same discipline is the only reason that scar across your chest didn't kill you. Besides, I just need a few drops."

I scowled as he walked up to the prisoner and cut on her upper arm as she tried to wiggle away, collecting a few drops and keeping them on the edge of the knife. He crouched on the ground and bright red flames lit up the tip of his index as he traced a pentagram of soot on the stone. He added a few runes at the tips afterwards, then traced a circle in the middle and flicked the blood into it. I couldn't quite make out the words he whispered afterwards, but I recognized the cadence: Mthethwa, an older dialect. He rose and took a step back.

"And now?" I asked.

"By contracts made, I summon you," he replied, still looking at the pentagram.

There was no flash of light or sudden smell of brimstone. One moment there was nothing, then a little creature stood inside the pentagram, sniffing at the circle. Its skin was a reddish grey, with its disproportionately large head sporting a pair of ears vaguely reminiscent of curved horns. Bat-like wings were coming out of its back and flapped as it chittered in a guttural language I'd only heard spoken once before. The Dark Tongue, what Captain had used to order the abomination that had taken us up the Tower.

"It doesn't look sentient," I finally said.

"It isn't," Warlock agreed. "Blood imps are never particularly clever and this one's not even a decade old."

I shot him a quizzical look.

"Devils begin as the personification of a concept," the Calamity explained with a sigh. "The older they get, the more they can think independently of that nature. There are differences according to breeds, of course, with more abstract concepts resulting in greater intelligence."

I raised an eyebrow. "And what does that thing personify?"

"Hunger for fresh blood," Warlock replied absently, eyes on the imp.

I followed his gaze saw the devil was now licking Breagach's blood like a cat would a saucer of milk, making ugly little satisfied sounds as it did. The sight was nauseating.

"Good," the mage smiled. "And now for the pleasant part."

He raised a hand and closed it into a fist. The imp rose into the air, letting out shrieks of dismay, then an invisible force brutally squashed it. Not a drop of the reddish mulch it turned into splattered, forming a perfect sphere still hovering above. Slowly it descended and filled the circle. There was a heartbeat after that, then lines of red emanated from the circle to touch all the tips of the pentagram. The whole thing smelled like rotten blood. Letters in the Old Tongue started appearing on the stone, forming a family tree circling around the remains of the imp. I looked askance at Warlock, who was reading them intently.

"Well now," he murmured. "Someone's more important than they look."

He pointed out a pair of words close to the circle.

"That's Duchess Kegan herself," he informed me.

"And their relation is?" I prompted.

"Cousin's daughter," he replied. "Late twenties in the line of succession, but she's still part of the ruling blood."

"If you think you can hold me-" Breagach started heatedly, but the Calamity lazily waved a hand and she slumped down abruptly, unconscious.

I let out a long breath. "Well," I announced, "that's that. You'll be keeping custody of her for now?"

"Until it's been decided what will happen to her, yes," he acknowledged. "You've secured the Hunter?"

"As secure as a hero can ever be, anyway," I grunted. "He's a liability. I don't suppose you've got a way to bind his Name?"

The Calamity shrugged as we left the room, stopping only a heartbeat to incinerate the remnants of his ritual with a flick of the wrist.

"It's possible to bind or usurp a Name, with the right tools," he agreed. "But a proper ritual site is needed to manage it. The only usable one in Callow is in Liesse, which would make the matter rather tricky."

Ugh. It figured. I'd just have to put in place as many precautions as I could. We strolled out of the room to a smaller chamber. Someone had helpfully placed a pitcher of wine on the reading table by the window and I wasted no time in grabbing a cup and pouring me something to drink. I could use a little steadying after that whole affair – the roof of my mouth still tasted like rotten blood. I poured Warlock one too after he gave

me a pointed look, sipping at my own as an awkward silence took hold. He was the one to break it.

"Later tonight," he spoke, "my son will ask to accompany you on your campaign. You will accept."

"He's been dropping hints in that direction for a few days," I grunted.

There was no denying that Apprentice would be an asset and I'd already intended to say yes, but being more or less ordered to do so rankled. I wasn't sure exactly where I stood to Warlock, when it came to the pecking order, but lower seemed like a safe assumption.

"Yes, he has," the Soninke sighed. "That was meant to indicate he would accept an invitation if you extended it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why didn't he just ask?"

"Black needs to go over Name etiquette with you again," he replied, irritation colouring his tone. "You are the Squire. The command is yours, which would make it extremely rude for another Named to simply invite themselves along. Villains have been killed for being that presumptuous."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Was it this complicated being a hero? Maybe it wasn't too late to switch career paths.

"I'll explain the misunderstanding," I said, putting down my half-finished glass of wine. "I can't say this was a particularly fun afternoon, but it was certainly educational. If you'll excuse me, I've got a general staff meeting in half a bell and more paperwork on the backlog than I want to think about."

"I do not excuse you," Warlock said mildly. "There's still one thing we need to discuss."

"I'll make sure nothing happens to him," I said seriously, pretty sure I knew where this was headed. "I know he's not used to military life."

"Oh it's not that," the man chuckled. "You're a clever girl, I'm sure you're perfectly aware of what the consequences of allowing my son to die on your watch would be."

I frowned. "Then what's this about?"

"Before leaving Ater," he spoke calmly, "you met with Malicia."

My blood ran cold, but I kept my face expressionless.

"I did."

No point in lying about it. There was nothing uncertain about the way he'd phrased that. The Calamity smiled.

"Allow me to share something about the rulers of Praes, Catherine. You see, both Amadeus and Alaya – Malicia, as you'd know her – see the Empire through the lens of how they operate."

The dark-skinned man sipped at his glass, eyes shadowed.

"Amadeus thinks of it as a great machine, and so sees himself as a cog. An important one, but ultimately replaceable. A simple matter of fit and function."

I could buy that easily enough. Black was capable of great cruelty but he was not, I believed, a cruel man by nature. Violence was a tool to him, a way to reach an outcome. That did not make him any less dangerous, or make his actions excusable. But it did matter, even if only a little.

"Alaya is a little trickier to grasp," Warlock murmured. "She sees it as a weave, and herself as the weaver. She cannot choose the materials she was given to work with, but she *can* choose what she makes with them. And if a particular thread runs out?"

The dark-eyed man shrugged.

"She merely has to secure a substitute, trusting that the work she'd already woven will be tight enough to hold."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked quietly.

"Because they're both wrong," the Calamity replied. "Praes isn't a machine or a tapestry – it's a living, breathing organism."

I frowned. "And what's that supposed to mean, exactly?"

A hard smile split the mage's face. "You can't rip out a creature's heart and just shove another in its place."

I kept my face blank. Warlock was Black's first companion, the dreams had shown me that much, and that he'd be my teacher's staunchest loyalist wasn't a surprise. But how much did he know? I hadn't agreed to Malicia's offer, not in so many words, and it concerned the far future anyway. Imehad told me to watch out for Scribe above the rest of Black's companions, but Warlock was the one sitting in front of me right now. I'd seen him in action when he'd been crippled by magical backlash and within moments of stepping onto the scene he'd incapacitated two heroes and casually slain another one. If it came to a fight against him, my chances of survival were... slim.

"You can stop panicking, girl," the dark-skinned man spoke coldly. "It is not my intent to kill you, though you'd be a fool to think I could not."

"I see no reason we should fight," I replied, as calm as I could manage. "We're on the same side."

The mage laughed, the sound darkly mocking. "You think the Empire is a single side? How delightfully naïve of you. We are not Callowans, child."

He leaned forward and there was nothing handsome about that face now, warped as it was by barely-contained power just itching to lash out.

"We were tribes and tribal kingdoms, before the Miezens, and if you scratch under the surface we are still. I know who my tribe is, Catherine Foundling. I have fought with them, bled and wept with them."

"Yet another Praesi telling me I can't be part of their little private club," I replied, anger freeing my tongue. "There's a shocker."

Because if the man thought I would just sit there and be castigated for something I hadn't done, wasn't even sure I should do, then he could go burn in the bloody Hells. Wasn't like he was unacquainted with the damned place.

"Your birth has nothing to do with this," he said harshly. "Neither Scribe nor Ranger are from Praes. Black barely is, by most of my people's standards. We are having this conversation because Malicia summoned you to the Tower and made you an offer."

"I didn't accept it," I spoke through gritted teeth.

"You didn't refuse it," he replied. "That is all someone like Alaya needs. She laid the seed, and in the coming years you will have to make a choice. As you are now, I know exactly which one you will make."

"You are," I spoke icily, "assuming a great deal."

"Maybe you will prove me wrong," Warlock shrugged. "I have been surprised in the past. But I speak to tell you this – if you don't, there will be a price."

"Whatever happened to not making obvious threats?" I spat.

"I don't think you quite understand. I love Amadeus, you see," Warlock admitted casually. "He is my oldest and dearest friend, a brother in all but blood. I don't care one whit for the Empire or Evil or all those carefully laid plans everybody seems to be following. So you can believe me when I say that if your knife finds his back, I will not kill you."

He leaned forward.

"What I will do is rip your soul out of that mangled husk you call a body, then cast it into the Void so you can continue screaming in unspeakable agony until Creation itself falls apart," he hissed.

Stepping back, he smoothed his robes and smiled pleasantly.

"I'm glad we had this talk. It's better to air these things out," he said as my fingers tightened against the grip of my sword. "You are excused, Catherine. Have a pleasant afternoon."

Putting down his cup he offered me a friendly wave and strolled away, whistling the air to the Legionary song. I stood there for a long moment, allowing my breath to steady and the fear to recede. I closed my eyes and forced my fingers to leave my sword, exhaling slowly. Hakram would need to find me another book, it seemed. *There's bound to be something out there about the best way to kill a mage.*

Heroic Interlude: Riposte

"Thirty-one: use a sword fit for your height and built, not the largest chunk of metal you can find. It will both improve your life expectancy and save you a great many jokes about overcompensation."

-*"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms"*, unknown author

"It's not as bad as it looks," Klaus spoke as he contemplated the map.

Regardless of her uncle's assurances, Cordelia was not enthused by the way the Liesse Rebellion was currently proceeding. The insurrectionists had avoided any majors defeat so far and managed to strike a few blows at the Legions, but it could not be said they were *winning*. Vale was in rebel hands and the Countess Marchford had been gathering troops from all over the south of Callow beneath the walls, but her own informants in Liesse's staff had sent word that she was likely to evacuate the city rather than give battle to the Sixth and Ninth Legions.

"Why would she retreat?" Cordelia asked. "She has nigh twenty thousand soldiers now, including a core of dwarven infantry. The Empire has only sent two legions to subdue her: eight thousand soldiers, at most."

The Prince of Hannover thanked the servant handing him a bowl of soup and slipped him a few coins. Cordelia refrained from rolling her eyes, as it would have been a breach of decorum. Servants were usually paid less in the central part of Procer than they were in the Lycaonese principalities, true, but they were hardly

beggars. Her uncle's habit of slipping silver to the hired help was as much a dig at the local nobility as it was genuine charity. The grey-haired man broke off a chunk of bread and dipped it into that foul onion broth he was inexplicably fond of, scattering a few crumbs over his previously pristine doublet.

"She's in a tricky position," Klaus finally replied. "Most of her men are peasant levies and those are likely to scatter if they get bloodied bad enough. There's the Black Knight to take into consideration, too. Half their boys will shit their breeches and run the moment he charges."

The First Prince did not wrinkle her nose in distaste, though she dearly wished that etiquette would allow her to properly express her disgust at the crudity just displayed. Uncle Klaus might have been a prince, but whenever speaking of war he reverted to a soldier's vocabulary. Instead she discreetly gestured for the servant to take away his soup when he wasn't looking. There were many ways to get her feelings across without needing to dip into impropriety.

"Then she could hide behind the walls of Vale," Cordelia pointed out. "She has seen to it that the surrounding lands were burned, denying the Empire opportunity to forage. If the levies have nowhere to run they will be forced to fight."

The prince of Hannover snorted, then frowned when he realized his meal had disappeared. He shot her an irritated look but she simply arched her eyebrow until he gave in with ill-grace. She had trained him well.

"You don't ever want to get into a siege with the Praesi," Klaus told her seriously.

"They have managed to take Summerholm only twice in over a millennium of trying," the First Prince noted. "How good at it can they really be?"

"We're not dealing with the Legions of a millennium ago," Klaus reminded her. "Or even fifty years ago. Praes is the only nation on Calernia that has a permanent corps dedicated to siege warfare, Cordelia. We use imported dwarven designs like everybody else but they make their own, and they'll only have gotten sharper since the Conquest. If they're given time to make their machines, it'll turn into a massacre."

Ah. There was a cultural divide at play here, she grasped. Procerans rarely took cities when they waged war on each other: princes disliked the idea of having sweaty, dirty soldiers ransacking their famously rich family seats. Wars between principalities were decided on the field, as peasant conscripts could be expected to breed themselves back to their former numbers in a decade or so. Lost battles were followed by trade

and territorial concessions, impermanent setbacks in the Ebb and Flow. Praesi, it seemed, played for keeps: whatever they took they intended to remain theirs as long as they could defend it.

"I do not understand how retreating will change the situation for the Countess," the First Prince admitted.

"She'll burn the ground as she moves further south," Klaus predicted. "When the Legions pursue they'll be exhausted and half-starved by the time they get to the battlefield."

"They *do* have a supply train, Uncle," Cordelia reminded him. "They can keep themselves fed."

"That's the whole point of having the Silver Spears based in Marchford," the prince of Hannover explained, tapping said city on the map with a wrinkled finger. "The moment the Sixth and the Ninth move south, he'll hit the supply trains and harass their rear."

"That strikes me as a particularly dangerous enterprise," the fair-haired woman commented.

Unfortunate, that. It would be for the best if the Exiled Prince survived the rebellion. The hero was the nephew of the current Tyrant of Helike, and by right the lawful ruler of the city-state. If he managed to become famous enough it might be possible to leverage that acclaim into putting him on the throne – which would neatly solve one of her two most immediate foreign policy problems. A friendly king in Helike would secure the lower western flank of the Principate and take the pressure off of one of her steadiest allies in the Assembly.

"He's not a green boy," the older man replied, rubbing the grey stubble covering his jaw. "He's fought in border skirmishes against Stygia and he's been on a few heroic adventures since his exile. I'm not worried about him pulling off his part of the plan."

"This newly-raised Fifteenth will be moving to meet him on the field," Cordelia said.

"A sloppy half-legion led by a Squire with no notable accomplishments to her Name," Klaus snorted. "They'll slow the Prince down some, which I assume is what the Black Knight wanted, but there's no real threat there."

"She drove back the Swordsman when he assaulted Summerholm," the First Prince pointed out.

Her uncle scoffed. "The Warlock did that. She was just on the scene when it happened. Besides, it's a good thing the Swordsman was slapped around a bit. Now he'll stop hunting Calamities and

go after opponents he can actually kill. The Baroness Dormer has the troops to drive this Heiress character out of her demesne, but she's been reluctant to engage without a Named on her side."

The contempt in the grizzled veteran's voice was thick. Unlike most other Calernian states, Proceran rulers did not develop a Name when they acceded to the throne – as a result, the armies of the Principate were rarely led by men and women bearing the mandate of Heaven. The score of military victories they'd accumulated nonetheless had left the Proceran military with a distaste for those who expected heroes to win their wars for them. *Easy for us to say, the fair-haired woman thought, when we so rarely find villains leading hosts into our land.* She still had a few other questions, mainly regarding why the Empire had yet to peel off Legions from the Red Flower Vales to reinforce their offensive, but they were interrupted by a maid who hurriedly curtsied.

"Your Highnesses," the woman spoke. "My deepest apologies for interrupting, but the Lady Augur request your presence."

Cordelia did not allow her surprise to show. It was rare for Agnes to send for her: ever since she'd come into her Role she'd become an even more solitary creature than usual. *A prediction, then,* she decided. She glanced at Klaus and he grimaced before rising to his feet, wincing at the cracking sounds his back made. A lifetime of wearing armour had not done wonders for his body, and he was no longer a young man. The First Prince dismissed the maid wordlessly and strode towards the garden her cousin haunted during daytime, her uncle following closely. Midday had barely passed and it was pleasant spring afternoon out, especially here among the hedges and flowers carefully cultivated by Proceran royalty over centuries.

Agnes was sitting alone on a wrought iron chair, her simple blue dress showing more of her legs than was strictly acceptable in polite society. Had she still been a mere branch member of the Hasenbach family Cordelia would have chided her for it, but Named got to live by their own standards. If she wanted to go around naked and covered in blood, there was not a man or woman in Procer who would dare to even comment on it. Agnes' skin was impossibly pale for the amount of time she spent outside and her Hasenbach-blond hair was cut in a short bob that had not grown an inch since she'd become the Augur. It was tame, considering the kind of appearance changes Names sometimes led to, but it still made the First Prince uncomfortable to look at it. It was the touch of the divine at work, no matter how mundane the detail.

"Cordelia, Uncle," the Augur spoke without turning.

She was looking at the sky, unconcerned by the glare of the sun.

"Agnes," the First Prince replied. "You sent your maid?"

There was a long pause. "A flock of turtledoves flew east this morning, as the bells rung," the Augur mentioned.

Cordelia did not sigh, though not for lack of desire.

"You will have to explain this to me," she reminded her cousin, who blinked in surprise.

"Ah, yes. I forget, sometimes," she explained. "One of your diplomatic couriers was intercepted."

"I thought you could warn us before that happened," Klaus broke in, frowning.

"It wasn't planned," Agnes replied sleepily. "Just an opportunity taken."

"Is the Stairway still secure?" Cordelia asked urgently.

Her cousin nodded absent-mindedly. "They don't know about that. I don't see them finding out before it's used."

The fair-haired ruler allowed her shoulders to loosen. Good. If the Dread Empress had found out, the results would have been... disastrous, to say the least.

"There's more," Agnes spoke, finally turning to look at them.

For once she looked like her attention was entirely on the there and then, eyes sharp with worry.

"There are elves in Callow. Two of them," she continued.

Cordelia closed her eyes and, for the first time in a year, allowed herself to swear. *Burning Heavens*. No, it would not do to jump to conclusions. There were precedents for elves leaving their forest temporarily, though admittedly very few. This did not have to be the prelude to military action. Gods, she hoped it was not. The only place the Forever King could turn his eyes to was south, and that was straight into Daoine. *And the moment an elf sets foot in the duchy, they will go on war footing*. The Deoraithe hated the elves like poison, over some ancient grudge about being the original inhabitants of the Golden Bloom. *And if Duchess Kegan is focusing on the elves, she will refuse to get involved in the rebellion*.

"Do you know why they left the forest?" she asked, more calmly than she felt.

"It's unclear," Agnes admitted, her earlier focus already disappeared as she looked away. "They're looking for something. Or fetching something. It will come to a head in Liesse, it's where all the knots are. Elves are... strange. It's like trying to map the stars from a lake's reflection."

Two elves, headed for Liesse. The damage even two of those could do... No elf over a thousand years old would ever deign to set foot outside the Golden Bloom but that meant nothing: a dozen elven foot soldiers could wipe out a company of soldiers without losing a single man, if they felt the inclination. A single Emerald Sword could do the same without even paying attention. The elves were Good, in the broadest sense of the term, but that didn't change the fact that they saw everyone but heroes and other elves as insolent vermin. That everyone coming within half a mile of the Golden Bloom died without warning had made that feeling very clear. Cordelia forced her mind to stay on track as her cousin drifted away into her own world.

"We no longer have time to dawdle, Uncle," she finally said. "Assemble a host. The Dominion needs to be brought to heel by winter."

"By your will, First Prince," the prince of Hannover bowed.

—

It was not a coincidence they'd run into the Silver Spears on their flight south.

Fate was a word William knew better than to throw around lightly, but to be Named was to be bound to the concept. *Power calls to power.* Finding the Helikean mercenaries camped by the village they needed to resupply at must have been necessary, for some reason the Swordsman did not yet grasp. There was always a reason. He needed to believe as much now more than ever. The Conjuror was dead. The Hunter was a prisoner, if not a corpse, and Breagach likely strapped to a table in some dungeon until she could be dissected. The Thief had disappeared without a word one night, and the betrayal left a foul taste in his mouth. Almorava said she'd be back before too long but William has his doubts. *And can I really blame her? I led them straight into a slaughterhouse.* The room they'd claimed at the only inn of the village was too small for all four of the present heroes to be truly comfortable, though none of the Helikean ones had yet to complain. Neither would the Bard, if the amount of bottles she'd gone through since claiming a chair was any indication.

The Lone Swordsman knew he was a handsome man – he'd attracted plenty of attention even before becoming a hero – but compared to the Exiled Prince he might as well have been a goblin. The man was tall and looked like he'd been carved out of single piece of marble, all perfect skin and long flowing curls that looked more golden than blonde. He must have been exceptionally vain before claiming his Name, to look this supernaturally flawless. His follower, the Page, looked more like an actual person. Short haired and slim, she was androgynous looking-enough that he had not been sure she was a woman before he heard her voice. She was

also quite obviously in love with the Prince, to the extent that it was almost embarrassing to watch.

"We had her cornered, until she dropped her hammer," the Exiled Prince said, recounting his raid on the Ninth and the way it had turned sour upon the Captain's appearance. There was a touch of disbelief to his voice, like he still couldn't quite believe what had happened. "Then she turned into this... creature."

"We already knew she's a werewolf," William reminded him. "I briefed you personally on what we know of the Calamities."

"I've seen werewolves before, Swordsman," the Prince replied through gritted teeth. "I've *killed* werewolves before. That abomination was something else entirely. She was tall as an ogre and she moved so fast I could barely see her. My men might as well have been lambs, for all the difference it made."

Page squeezed his shoulder comfortingly, but the Prince barely noticed. William resisted the urge to cringe. How could he not have cottoned on to the fact that his closest supporter had feelings for him? Or was he merely pretending not to? Heroes did tend to attract a lot of attention from the opposite sex, and even the same. The Swordsman had always preferred to air out the fact that he had no intention of getting romantically involved with anyone whenever he was in similar situations, but he wasn't unfamiliar with the concept of ignoring an uncomfortable truth to avoid breaking someone's heart. *Or he could just be an imbecile*, William thought uncharitably.

"She bit the head off of my second-in-command before we could do anything," the Exiled Prince continued. "The Order of the Righteous Spear drove her back but we had to retreat anyway. She bought just enough time for the Sixth to get their ranks in order."

There was no need to belabour the explanation any further. It was one thing to hit Praesi legionaries in the flank with the element of surprise on your side, quite another to lead a charge into the Ironsides when they were expecting you. The flower of Callow's chivalry had been taught that lesson on the Fields and never recovered from the near-total losses it cost them to learn. For all his theatrics, the Free Cities hero was a talented commander. He wouldn't throw his men at the enemy recklessly, not when his Silver Spears represented a solid half of the total cavalry the rebellion had at its disposal.

"It was still the largest victory we've managed against the Empire so far," William replied. "And you can believe they've taken note of it. They're sending the Fifteenth after you, last I heard."

The man laughed, his long golden curls shaking as he did. The Swordsman was morbidly curious about how the other hero was able to keep them looking this pristine in the middle of a campaign, but decided not to ask. Name perk, most likely.

"A rookie villain and her understrength crew of miscreants?" the Prince mocked. "The Empire thinks too much of themselves."

And now that wasn't something he could just let go. You couldn't underestimate the Squire, that was the kind of stupidity she *fed* on.

"Wipe that smile off your face," William replied flatly. "If you take Squire lightly for even a single fucking moment, she will flay your hide and make a standard out of it."

The Prince looked dubious. "I understand that she is your nemesis and that in some ways she must be your match, but she's never led an army into battle before. As far as I know, you're the only hero she's ever fought. She is ill-equipped to deal with the likes of the Silver Spears."

"The first time I met Catherine Foundling," the Callowan spoke quietly, "she arranged the death of her four rivals in the span of a single night and then threw me into a river after I literally split open her torso. *She doesn't go down*, Prince. Corner most villains and after a brutal fight it's done, but short of decapitating her you're not going to make her stop. She's not that powerful, but in a way that makes it worse: she knows that, so she became tricky and ruthless instead. Not to mention I'm fairly sure her second-in-command is coming into a Name, because he scrapped with Thief and walked away without any major wounds."

"I'm confident Page will be able to handle the orc," the Prince replied drily, failing to notice the adoring smile the woman in question sent his way at the endorsement.

He really had to be doing that on purpose, William thought. He couldn't *possibly* be that dense, could he?

"Single combat."

Everybody turned to look at the Wandering Bard, who'd somehow managed to shake herself out of her drunken stupor.

"Welcome back," the Swordsman greeted her. "Are you finally done drinking? That'd be a first."

"That's her weakness," the heroine elaborated, ignoring him after an amused look. "Squire is a transitional Name, it can't match the kind of raw power a fully realized hero can throw around. Get her in a one-on-one fight and you should be able to kill her."

"I'll keep that in mind," the Prince replied thoughtfully.

"The orc shouldn't be much of a problem," William grunted. "You can only expect so much out of a monster."

The two Helikeans traded uncomfortable looks. On most days the Swordsman would have let it go, but today? No, he was done playing nice. Not with that foreigner and his cushy little life, who'd gone from heir to a throne to one of the wealthiest exiles on the continent.

"You think I'm prejudiced," the green-eyed man stated.

"I find your comments distasteful," the Exile Prince replied flatly. "And unworthy of a hero."

"And I think now's a good time for everyone to retire," the Bard broke in, but they were far past that.

"You know what I find distasteful?" William asked with a pleasant smile. "When a rich brat from the Free Cities comes and tells me greenskins aren't fucking monsters."

The Lone Swordsman leaned forward.

"You've had an easy living down south," he said. "All you Free Cities folk, fighting your little land wars against each other. But this is Callow, princeling. Our enemies don't make treaties when they win, they don't use trade embargos or petty intrigues. You know what orcs do when they come here? *They rape, murder and pillage*. They even eat our dead, like we're godsdamned cattle."

"Legion regulations forbid both rape and pillage," the Page interrupted hotly. "And who do you think you are, you Callowan hick? Just a half-rate hero from a backwater-"

"I'm what's left of this Kingdom after the rest of Calernia abandoned us to the Empire," he snarled. "Two *thousand* years, the greenskins have been setting this land on fire at every occasion, and you think you get to lecture me about what they are? Orcs don't make cities. They don't trade or farm. All they do is *kill*, and teach their whelps the same. They contribute as much to Creation as the godsdamned plague. You think they changed as a species because of rules not even fifty years old? You can put a leash on a wolf and it's still a vicious predator. You see that's what they are, when it comes down to it: wolves on two legs, just itching to sink their teeth into something."

William laughed.

"So go on, tell me it's disgraceful the way I talk about them," he said. "Let's see how long you keep saying that, when they start eating your friends."

The Lone Swordsman rose to his feet, pushing away the table.

"We're done here," he spoke. "Good luck with the Fifteenth, and don't say I didn't warn you."

—

The rage had left him by the time he ended up on the roof, leaving him feeling cold and alone. It wouldn't be the first time, and it wouldn't be the last: both his temperament and the nature of his Name tended to put him in the position. He stayed there until night fell, drifting in and out of sleep. There'd been little enough time for that evading the Empire's patrols. Eventually he heard someone scrabbling across the tiled roof: the Wandering Bard, he knew without looking. She plopped herself down next to him. For a long time, they remained silent.

"Did you notice?" he asked suddenly. "The villagers are avoiding us. Not just the Silver Spears – which I'd understand since they're foreign mercenaries – but us too. At first I thought they were afraid of Praesi retaliation when we leave, but there's more to it than that. They were glaring at us, Almorava. Like we're an occupying army."

"Not all of them," the Bard said. "Some were even trying to enrol in the Spears."

"The older men and women," William replied quietly. "The ones who actually lived under the Kingdom – they were the angriest. It's... not what I expected."

"Thought it would be the other way around, did you?" Almorava guessed.

"I know taxes are lower under the Empire," he admitted. "And the Legions have clamped down on bandits. Imperial Governors are better organized than the nobles used to be, when they're not corrupt."

"So they can squeeze as much gold out of their term as they can," the Bard noted. "Not out of a taste for good governance."

"Does that really matter to most people?" William asked tiredly. "As long as it's easier to feed their children, what do they care if the Praesi line their pockets?"

The Bard pulled from her flask, dangling her legs off the edge. She liked to do that, he'd noticed. He'd never seen the attraction himself: he'd become wary of heights since Squire had thrown him off Summerholm's ramparts.

"Just because they're stronger or better organized doesn't mean they're right, William," she said.

"Doesn't it?" he wondered. "You know, when I first met Squire, she said something to me. *Nobody here's any more free than when you started.*"

He leaned back against the stone.

"She's not wrong. If we lose, what have I accomplished except filling a few graveyards?"

"First," Almorava spoke, "I'd argue that those deaths were all well-deserved. They're an occupying force, Willy. They don't get to annex another country and then whine when it fights back, even if it's twenty years later. Second, you're looking at this wrong."

He half-turned to look at her, but unsurprisingly she was drinking again. She held up a finger to tell him to wait while she finished off the rest of her flask.

"Gods, that stuff is horrible," she muttered, wiping her lips. "I can't believe even the Lycaonese would enjoy it. But, as I was saying, you're thinking about this the wrong way. Sure, by starting the rebellion you endangered a lot of people's lives. Sure, for most of Callow living conditions under the Empire are better than they were under the Kingdom."

"If you're attempting to disagree with me," the Swordsman frowned, "I'm sorry to say you're not doing very well."

"Here's the rub, darling," she replied, putting a finger on his lips and drunkenly shushing him. "The way things are right now? That's not Praes. That's Empress Malicia and her Black Knight."

"I don't follow," he admitted. "Those two are Praes, in every way that matters."

"They're Praes *right now*," the Bard corrected him. "So what happens when one of them croaks it, or both? They've been in charge of the Empire for forty-odd years. That's long, by Imperial standards. Sooner or later one of them is going to make a mistake, then the opposition will pounce – that's how Evil works."

"You don't think their policies will survive them," William realized.

That was... well, pretty likely actually. The sort of calculated, patient Evil he was fighting against was the exception and not the norm. And while villainous Roles essentially allowed their Named to live forever, in practice villainous rulers usually lasted shorter than heroic ones – whose lifespan was about the same as that of a human untouched by the divine.

"You're not at war with Malicia, William," Almorava reminded him. "You're at war with the Dread Empire. Eventually some madman is going to end up climbing the Tower, and the same people glaring at you now are the ones who'd be yelling the loudest for someone to save them."

He looked up to the sky. Full moon tonight, the Eye of Heaven out in all its splendour. How long had it been, since he'd last sat down and looked at the land he was trying to save?

"It seems unfair," he finally admitted. "That the people I'm trying to free are complaining about it not being easy. Then again, who am I to complain?"

He closed his eyes.

"You know what it means, right?" he asked. "That I'm sworn to the Choir of Contrition?"

The Bard's voice was quiet, almost gentle.

"That you did something unforgivable. Something you could spend your whole life atoning for and still fall short."

He laughed bitterly. "A poetic way to put a very ugly story. I used to live in one of the villages part of the Liesse governorship, you see. My parents were cobblers. My mother's father was a knight under King Robert so I got the sword, but to be honest we weren't all that different from anyone else. I only started practicing with it to impress girls, though I kept it up when I saw I had some talent. It wasn't a wealthy life, but we were better off than most – I was going to inherit the trade, since my sister didn't care for it."

It was good that she didn't interrupt, ask anything. He wasn't sure he would have been able to continue if she had.

"She was engaged to man from Liesse, the third son of some minor noble. Never liked him. He lorded his education over other people, used words he knew they wouldn't know. Mary was clever though, liked books, so she got it."

William let out a shaky breath. He had, in a way, never felt so naked in his life. There was not another living soul who knew that story, and he still wasn't sure why tonight he'd finally felt the need to unburden himself. Because she was a Bard, maybe. Because before the year was done he might be dead and someone, *anyone* should know the truth of it.

"He was the wrong kind of clever," William whispered. "Joined a resistance group, talked at dinner about how the people would rise one day and throw out the Legions. Was all talk at first,

but one day they decided to kill one of the governor's men. Collaborators should all die, they said. Idiots."

He smiled mirthlessly.

"Must have been at least five spies in their group. I'm pretty sure the Eyes started it in the first place. Eventually he told my sister what they planned and she jumped right in. Walls were thin. I overheard."

He paused, then stopped. Just thinking about what followed made him want to puke. He felt something cold against his arm and opened his eyes in surprise. A bottle of Liesse apple brandy, the stuff they made out of hard cider. He snorted and took a swallow of the suspiciously already-open bottle. Steadied his hands, which he hadn't noticed were trembling.

"Confronted her the night before," he confessed. "Told her it was mad. Wouldn't change anything, and didn't she know what the Praesi did to rebels? The whole family hangs, if it's treason. But Mary? She was on a crusade. She was going to free Callow. The man was just a beginning, a first step. She wasn't going to get caught and she wasn't going to stop."

He took a long, deep pull from the bottle. Gods, it would be so much easier doing this drunk. It would dull the feeling of it.

"I'd like to say I was thinking of my parents when I did it, but I wasn't," William whispered. "I was thinking of the tanner's daughter I had a thing for, and how we might get married when I got the shop. I was thinking about how selfish my sister was, throwing me away for people we didn't even know. For a *principle*, just a make-believe wish."

Another swallow but his mouth was dry.

"I stabbed her with a table knife, right in the neck. She was dead in moments. Now here's the part where it really becomes unforgivable. My parents weren't home, still at the shop I assumed. I thought maybe nobody would know. But I couldn't just leave her there, or get out the door with a corpse. People would notice."

He laughed, because what else was there to do? Gods, every day he put on white it felt like a lie. It should be red, red like the blood he still saw on his hands whenever he prayed and the Hashmallim listened. They wouldn't let him forget, let that night become a memory instead of a lash. They were right to.

"Broke the knife against her collarbone, so I fetched a butcher's piece from the kitchen. Half a bell I must have spent chopping up my sister in little pieces. I was about to start putting the meat in bags when the legionaries showed up."

The laughter froze in his throat. Would that he could choke on it, but he'd left merciful ends like that behind him long ago.

"The idiots got caught. They'd already arrested my parents and all the other families. But me? They put me in a separate cell. Then the morning after some Soninke came to me. Dragged me up, clapped my shoulder. Said I wouldn't hang, he just wouldn't hear of it. I'd done my duty to the Empire, I was an example to all Callowans. Told me there'd be no trouble inheriting the shop and sent me on my way."

William let out a long, shaky breath then drowned it in some more brandy.

"This is why I can do what I do, Bard. You think I didn't see the look of disgust on your faces when I carved up those officers? It's fine, you *should* be disgusted. It was a foul, horrible thing I did. And I'll do it again, and again, and again until Callow is free."

He smiled, and this time it was almost genuine.

"I went a little mad, afterwards. Went into the wilds, almost starved. But then I saw an angel, and it said it would never forgive me."

He glanced at Almorava and she looked like she wanted to weep but had forgotten how. He handed her back the bottle.

"Contrition is not forgiveness, Bard. Can never be forgiveness. It's not in their nature. They already told me where I'm going after I die, and it's not the nice place. So I'll get my hands dirty for the rest of you, because that's what I'm meant for now."

He let out a tired sigh.

"Besides, they made me a promise," he murmured. "Before I go Below, I'll get to see Mary one last time. Apologize. Doesn't matter if she accepts or not, you know. She deserves to hear me beg, for what I did. Won't even it out, but what else can I do?"

He heard her finish the bottle, then drop it down. A long moment of silence, then the sound of glass breaking. He almost laughed – the brandy was starting to take effect.

"Oh, you poor Contrition fools," the Bard murmured. "You break my heart every time."

Villainous Interlude: Coullisse

"Still waters are the hungriest."

– Soninke saying

There were so many defensive wards layered around his tent that even insects trying to crawl through would be instantly fried.

It wasn't for his personal safety, of course. Amadeus knew better than to rely on magic for that: there were ways to undo sorcery, if you had the right tools at hand. Just the belief that he was ever safe would be a dangerous liability – heroes had a way of slipping through the cracks, especially the grittier types. No, this was purely for the sake of privacy. His contact with the Tower had been infrequent at best, these last two decades: letters took months and could be intercepted, two-way scrying could be detected and even listened on. But now and then, it became a necessity to talk with Alaya face to face. For that purpose Wekesa had crafted the both of them a highly specialized tool, two halves of a mirror linked so deeply it took but a touch to have them connect. The protections weaved into the spells were some of the nastiest he'd ever seen, and as far as he knew no one trying to eavesdrop on a conversation between the Empress and himself had ever survived the attempt.

Unlike most people expecting a meeting with the Dread Empress of Praes, Amadeus had not spent a great deal of effort making himself look presentable. There was no stubble on his jaw, not that there should be: he hadn't needed to shave since becoming the Black Knight, as he'd never thought of himself as someone who had facial hair. He wore a simple long-sleeved grey cotton shirt with some cleverly hidden metal plates, which combined with his comfortable trousers of the same colouring lent him a fairly casual appearance. His sword was within reaching distance, but that was nothing unusual: he could count the number of times it hadn't been on one hand, since he'd first become a Squire claimant. A gentle touch of the finger had the mirror rippling, and after a heartbeat the silhouette of Her Most Dreadful Majesty Malicia, First of Her Name, Tyrant of Dominions High and Low, Holder of the Nine Gates and Sovereign of All She Beheld appeared on the surface.

"Maddie," the ruler of Praes greeted him.

"Allie," he replied just as dryly.

Most people would have expected Alaya to wear some kind of sheer, mind-bogglingly revealing nightdress at this time of the night. The truth was a little different: the Dread Empress of Praes was adorned in loose woollen pants and a conservative button-up shirt that covered her up to her neck. For all that she played the part of the supremely skilled seductress in public, the dark-skinned woman had never truly left behind her very provincial views on propriety. Being part of the Imperial seraglio under Nefarious – may that hook-nosed wretch forever scream in the deepest Hells – had saddled her with a reputation, though, and she'd elected to take advantage of it. It helped that she was undeniably one of

the most beautiful women in the Empire. Weaving a few spells into her dresses allowed her to turn that attraction into fascination, and so put everyone dealing with her at a disadvantage. Men and women alike tended to think with their genitals around her, a dangerous liability when trying to outmanoeuvre someone with a mind as sharp as Alaya's. That she was widely known to be only interested in women was, amusingly enough, not much of a hindrance when it came to manipulating men. There was no shortage of prancing idiots in the nobility of the Wasteland who believed the magic wand between their legs would be the thing to change the Empress' preferences.

"You have such an unpleasant smile," the Empress sighed. "It always looks like it's at someone else's expense."

"It usually is," Amadeus admitted shamelessly.

She rolled her eyes, drawing a grin out of him. He did enjoy the way she acted when it was only the two of them. The woman she turned into when keeping the pack of jackals that passed for the upper class of Praes in line was sublimely entertaining, but she was also a carefully crafted façade. The Alaya he'd met when they were both so young, the same girl he'd spent so many nights with debating the Empire *should be* instead of the way it was, she only came out rarely nowadays. It had been ages since Alaya had thrown a tankard at anyone, even, which was definitely a shame. Amadeus was of the opinion that the behaviour of the High Lords would improve considerably if the Empress threw things at them every time they misbehaved. And considering the way some of the Tyrants have acted in the past, that wouldn't even register as eccentric by Praesi standards.

"And now you're smirking," Alaya noted. "Spit it out."

"Just remembering how terrible a waitress you were," he informed her.

"At least I never toppled a foreign government drunk," she replied, arching a perfectly-manicured eyebrow.

"I was tipsy at best," he protested.

They shared a smile, but after a moment her face turned serious.

"I suppose we should get to business," she said. "One of Ime's people intercepted a diplomatic courier from Hasenbach."

"Finally," he murmured. "She found a way around the Augur's abilities?"

"We think she can only foretell it if it's been planned," Alaya told him. "We're moving additional agents into place to create more opportunities."

He hummed thoughtfully. He'd have to pass the conclusion along to Eudokia. She'd been getting frustrated at her own failures.

"The contents?"

"Nothing too surprising," the Empress grimaced. "She's sounding out the League for military readiness."

"We've still got three of the seven aligned with us," Amadeus grunted. "The others won't move with a majority vote that slim, they'd be leaving their own city-states undefended against our allies."

"She's just angling to keep Helike off her back," Alaya replied. "If she pushes an official truce with the Principate through vote, she'll have the border secure for a few years."

"Having the Tyrant take the throne there was an unexpected surprise," the Knight shrugged. "I won't complain if it helps, but it was never something we planned to rely on. I'd rather she spent time on the Free Cities than dealing with the Dominion."

"Levant will fold if she pushes back," the Empress said. "They're not looking for an actual war, just being opportunistic."

It was a shame the Red Snake Wall made the Dominion's northern border unassailable. Hasenbach was looking for a war abroad to consolidate her position and Levant would have made an easier target than the Empire without it. It wouldn't even be the first time Procer turned their eyes in that direction: the territory now making up the Dominion had spent two centuries as part of the Principate, before seceding with Ashuran help.

"Regardless," Alaya continued, "I have other concerns."

Amadeus raised an eyebrow.

"I'm listening."

"This rebellion. You could have put this whole matter to rest months ago," Alaya said. "Peeling a legion off of the Vales to flank them and sending another across the Hwaerte would have crushed the insurrection in its infancy."

"True," the Knight admitted.

"I understand the need to groom your apprentice, Maddie, but this is going too far. You're deliberately stretching out the lifespan of a threat to the Empire so that she can prove herself on the field," the Empress told him. "This entire affair is an unnecessary risk."

"It is a risk, I'll give you that much," the green-eyed man conceded. "But unnecessary? Quite the opposite."

Alaya's eyes narrowed. "You're up to something."

He shrugged. "Aren't I always? In this case, the objective is fairly straightforward: I am putting an end to the rise of heroic Names in Callow."

"I would argue that's impossible," the Empress frowned. "The best we've managed is to regulate the frequency they form at."

Amadeus' lips quirked into a wry smile. "The key word in that sentence being we."

"Her managing to kill the Lone Swordsman would buy us a year or two at best," Alaya scoffed. "We've gone over this before. Wekesa putting down the Wizard of the West didn't stop mage-Names from forming down the line, nemesis or not."

"You're still framing this in terms of Catherine being one of us," Amadeus said, leaning forward. "She isn't. She is a Callowan using a Praesi Name for purposes that ultimately serve the land of her birth. This is no longer a story about the Empire maintaining dominion over its conquest: it stopped being that the moment she became involved. This narrative is about Callow's soul, which of two paths it should take in the coming years: the Swordsman's revolution at all costs or the Squire's appropriation of the system."

Alaya drew a sharp breath. "And if she wins--"

"When she wins," Amadeus corrected.

"Then heroes will stop rising to oppose her, until she succeeds or loses her way," the Empress finished, face troubled. "Maddie this is... Both of us have walked this line before, but that's something else. You're trying to manipulate the forces driving a Role. Calling this playing with fire wouldn't be doing it justice."

"I imagine it is mildly blasphemous at best," Amadeus smiled. "Amusing, if not of any great import."

Alaya grimaced.

"Assuming your gambit is success," she said. "Which is, for the record, an assumption I am not yet ready to make. In the aftermath, she would have to be allowed to implement some degree of reform. Otherwise she'll end up having to oppose us as the next obstacle in her way."

Amadeus blinked. "Well, yes," he replied slowly.

"That could cost us Callow, in the long term," the Empress stated. "I do not want to have to put down a Legion-trained native army in thirty years."

"Our current methods won't work for much longer, you know this," the Knight frowned. "Rebellions will keep cropping up and it's a matter of time until the Principate is able to mount an invasion again. We can't win a war with them while putting down domestic unrest, both Grem and I have run the scenarios."

"Procer is being handled," the Soninke replied.

"You can only start fires in the First Prince's backyard so many times, Allie," Amadeus told her frankly. "She's already managed to cut you out of their internal politics and now she's making making progress in the Free Cities. As soon as the Dominion backs down she can turn all her attention to us."

"She won't be in a position to make a move for at least two years," the Empress informed him. "As soon as I have additional agents in position I can start funding her opposition regardless of those pesky little laws she put in place."

It had been a masterful stroke, when Hasenbach had passed the legislation through the Highest Assembly. The origin of loans above a certain sum to the rulers of all principalities now had to be disclosed to the First Prince, which had put an end to the activities of the Pravus Bank on Proceran soil. If Alaya propped up a political opponent of the First Prince, the woman in question would know in a matter of weeks. And if the loan went undeclared, she would have a pretext to move against her enemy as soon as the information surfaced. Which it would, there was no doubt about that: Hasenbach's spy network was nearly as good as theirs and she had a Named future-teller on her side. There was a reason Assassin hadn't already taken care of the First Prince – both attempts made had been anticipated and neatly countered before they could get anywhere close to her. Still, there were ways around the laws. Multiple smaller loans through proxies would achieve much the same result, but putting said proxies into place would take *time*. When everything was finally in position, though, odds were that Hasenbach's position in Procer would no longer be vulnerable.

"Two years won't be enough," he finally said. "Even if we raised another five legions tomorrow Procer would still outnumber us nearly two to one in professional soldiers. We wouldn't be able to hold the Vales, and it would all be downhill from there."

"And what's your alternative, Maddie?" the Empress replied tiredly. "What does your Squire actually intend to do, if she gets her way? I've yet to discern an actual plan of action from her. She just strolls from one mess to the next."

"She'll want official authority to curtail abuses of Imperial power on Callowan soil, at the very least," the dark-haired man spoke. "Not, all in all, an unreasonable thing to ask."

"You want me to give a sixteen year-old Callowan girl power of life and death over Praesi high nobility," Alaya pointed out. "I know you've been staying out of Wasteland politics, but you should be able to guess how well that will go over."

The Knight smiled coldly. "So let them grumble. Let them rebel, even. There's a reason half the Legions are still in Praesi territory. The moment they take arms they will be crushed underfoot, as they were when we first took power."

"We're not the underdog anymore, Maddie," the Empress replied in an irritated tone. "There's more to ruling than hanging whoever disagrees with you. We already took the Empire, now we have to actually *run* it. Something you'd know, if you hadn't spent the last twenty years playing soldier abroad."

He let the comment pass, this once, though sharp replies were on the tip of his tongue. There was nothing to win in allowing this to become a personal argument instead of a political one.

"The Truebloods have been pressuring you," he guessed instead.

"They closed ranks behind High Lady Tasia," Alaya explained. "Killing Mazus and his father was too stark a reminder that we're keeping them on a short leash. I'm going to have to make concessions to keep them under control."

Heiress' mother. Not unexpected, thought definitely unwelcome. It was to be expected that the High Lady of Wolof would leverage her child's rise into becoming the leader of that band of malcontents.

"What do they want?" Amadeus asked. "They should know better than to ask for a lift on the Chancellor ban."

"If she was that stupid she wouldn't be a threat," the Empress replied. "They stayed moderate. Reinstatement of goblin breeding restrictions to pre-Conquest levels, the end of tribute reduction for Clans who provide legionaries. They also want the tributes that went unpaid under Nefarious to be collected retroactively, with interest."

"Going for the Reforms, then," the Knight grunted. "They're not even being original anymore. How will you put them off?"

The Truebloods hadn't made a push for changes in the War College, which was for the best. He'd have needed to take punitive action if they had, and the current climate was already volatile enough. The nobility's ongoing struggle to take back the changes made when Malicia had first taken the Tower had been mostly fruitless so far, though they'd managed a handful of victories. Mostly in the way they'd managed to stop any other steps forward: his own attempt to have noble titles granted to Clan chieftains had been

tabled for at least the next decade. Met with silence on the Empress' part, the green-eyed man frowned.

"Alaya?" he said, then felt his blood run cold as the realization sunk in. "You can't be serious."

"Valid arguments were made," the Empress replied flatly. "The Tribes already recovered all the losses they incurred when we took Callow. Allowing them to accumulate more numbers would shift the balance of power in the Empire to our disadvantage."

"And the tributes?" he asked.

"They broke the law by ignoring their obligations to the Tower, even if Nefarious was unfit to rule," the Soninke noted. "As for the rest, incentives to enrol are hardly needed given the numbers of orcs we already have under the banner."

"If you implement both it will cripple enrolment in the Legions," the Knight said. "The Clans won't be able to part with even half as much of their people under that kind of a financial burden."

"Tasia's very objective, I imagine," the Empress replied. "Not one I entirely disagree with. Too large a portion of our armies is not human."

"Humans still make four legionaries out of ten," the Knight pointed out. "Only orcs come even close to that. The gap will only widen if Callowans start joining in significant numbers."

"That's still over half our legionaries born to loyalties other than the Tower," Alaya retorted.

"The entire point of the Reforms is to give them a stake in the Empire," Amadeus reminded her. "Keeping them under our thumb is counterproductive when we're trying to make a fist. Allie, they're pushing now of all times because it's *working*. Catherine's boy proved as much: an unprecedented Role, bound to the Legions of Terror and in the hands of an orc."

"Yes," the Empress said quietly. "To the Legions. Not the Tower."

Amadeus felt the old calm settle on him. The clarity that came with danger, the perfect awareness that had seen him survive one uphill battle after another.

"We're better than this, Alaya," he said. "*You're* better than this. If we begin to doubt each other now, all we built will come down on our heads."

The dark-skinned woman let out a long breath. The controlled façade she's put on when the conversation had taken an unpleasant turn broke for a moment, allowing a glimpse of very real dismay. Or was it? He'd never been good at reading her. There was a time

where that had hardly mattered, but they were no longer the people they'd been when they were young even if their faces had remained the same.

"You think I enjoy this, Maddie?" she murmured. "Gods, you're the only person I've been able to trust since I was seventeen. You may well be the only man in this entire Empire I can call a friend."

"But," the Knight spoke quietly.

"But," she repeated in the same tone, "in the end, there can only be one person sitting on the throne."

Amadeus closed his eyes. How had it come to this, he wondered? He'd always known that the degree of trust between Alaya and himself was unusual, by villainous standards. But it had needed to be, for what they'd done. By outlawing the Name of Chancellor they'd shifted the balance of the ruling class of the Empire. There was no buffer between the Empress and the nobility, which meant she had to deal with their intrigues herself. In some ways, Alaya had more direct power over Praes than any other Empress or Emperor before her – but that also meant that dealing with internal matters had to take up most of her time. Which, in turn, had meant that she'd had to delegate almost all authority over Callow to him. He'd been King of Callow in fact, if not in name, for the last twenty years. In and of itself that would not have been much of an issue, but the fault line ran deeper than that. Out of the current thirteen marshals and generals of the Empire, ten had started out as officers under his command. Their loyalty went to him over Alaya, a damning fact when the strongest pillar of the Dread Empress' power over the Empire was the Legions of Terror. Could he really blame her for crafting a power base independent from his own? No. *But blame doesn't matter. Never has, never will. Villains must attend to reality or be swallowed by it.* The Black Knight opened his eyes. In the back of his head the machine woke up, a hundred thousand gears starting to turn as his Name stirred awake.

"Forty years I have fought for this Empire," he spoke. "I made myself into a liar, a cheat and a murderer. I smothered infants in their cribs and engineered the deaths of thousands. I watched the love of my life walk away from me. And not once did I regret it. Do you know why?"

Silence.

"Because it *worked*," he hissed. "Because we took the laughingstock of this continent and turned it into a nation to rival any other. And we did it without cutting deals, without taking shortcuts. We've tried their way for a thousand years, Alaya. Built the flying fortresses, bled the sacrifices. And it failed, every godsdamned time."

He bared his teeth.

"We go back now and we're no better than those who came before us. Praes is not special. It is not unique. It is not predestined for greatness and *neither are we*. The moment we forget that, we deserve to lose."

Malicia's face was blank of emotion.

"Are you done?"

"Am I?" he asked tiredly. "Gods, how I have wondered. If my Role finally caught up with me, if I've become as mad as they say I am. If I turned into just another raving fool with a Name, screaming at the Heavens. But if I'm not... Allie, all I can see down the path you'd take us is failure. Trading short-term gains for long-term disasters. So I implore you, think about this again."

The Empress' face softened, after a moment.

"I forget, sometimes, that you are under just as much pressure as I am," she replied. "I'd say it's because you so rarely show weakness, but it's not much of an excuse. I should know better. Get some sleep, Amadeus. End the rebellion. We'll revisit this when the both of us are in a better state."

The mirror's surface dimmed, leaving only his reflection. The Black Knight leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

The gears kept turning.

Chapter 13: Fireside

"Swiftness is the lifeblood of war. No army can win a battle if it isn't standing on the battlefield."

– Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

There were still a few days before we linked up with the other Legions, but we were making good time.

The Fifteenth was camped for the night, sprawled over the plains of central Callow like some enormous steel-clad beast. Fires dotted the inside of the fortified encampment now that night was beginning to fall, both for cooking and heat: spring out here could get chilly after dark. The winter snows were long gone, melted by an unexpectedly early warming, but once the sun was gone traces of the harsh Callowan winter could still be felt. Especially for my Praesi legionaries, unused to it as they were. Seasons in the Wasteland were a complicated a changing affair, for at some point a Dread Empress had tried to "steal the

Kingdom's weather" and instead screwed up seasons for the entire Empire – not to mention breaking what little cultivable land she'd still had. It was, Black had told me, the reason that there was a permanently brewing storm in the sky above the Tower. One of the only parts of Praes spared the backlash had been the Green Stretch, forever cementing its role as the breadbasket of the Wasteland. Though that label now also extended to pretty much all of Callow, these days. The Empire imported grain and fruit heavily from the conquered lands, the wagonloads of food almost as precious as the gold they taxed out of the people farming it.

I was ahead of paperwork, for once in my life, and so I'd decided to reward myself with a bell of drinking with friends by the fire. I'd had precious little time for that kind of thing since the Fifteenth had been raised. Even with Hakram handling the lion's share of the parchment that came my way I still needed to sign more forms than it was physically possible for me to read through during my waking hours. If our legion had been better structured I'd have been able to delegate more, but for all that legally speaking we were a full legion the fact that we remained at half-strength caused no end of headaches. Our stay in Summerholm after the Lone Swordsman business had been wrapped up had granted me a dent in the pile, though, and that was something to be celebrated. Nauk and Ratface were on duty tonight, but both Hakram and Nilin weren't. Whether Juniper and Aisha would make an appearance was a toss up depending on the mood of my Legate, but with the addition of Masego to our little crew I'd nabbed another companion. The scholarly-looking mage was horrible at holding his drink, for a Soninke, but that only made it more hilarious.

Before I could decide what bonfire I'd claim for my miscreants I ran into Pickler, who looked to be in a murderous mood. Unusual, that: of all the goblins I'd met she was one of the most even-tempered. Not particularly diplomatic, sure – I'd caught her sketching out schematics a few times when general staff meetings ran too long – but on the goblin-eagerness-to-commit-violence scale she pretty much defined the low end. I whistled sharply to catch her attention before she passed me.

"Pickler," I called out. "Is there a problem?"

The goblin started, jarred out of her thoughts. She came closer, pitching her voice so she wouldn't be overheard.

"I've spent the afternoon within talking distance of both Nauk and Robber," the Senior Sapper cursed. "If I don't get a drink in me soon, I will drown the both of them."

I winced in sympathy. I liked both the men she'd mentioned well enough, but together they could be a massive pain in the neck. It must have been worse for the common object of their affections.

"Hakram has a stash of aragh he thinks I don't know about," I told her with a friendly clap on the shoulder. "I'll go grab it. Find us a fire and you can vent."

The goblin eyed the hand still on her shoulder with a frown.

"I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you're not signalling your willingness to sleep with me," she said.

The hand came off like I'd gotten my fingers burned.

"Is that what shoulder claps mean for you guys?" I asked.

"We don't usually do touching unless we're involved with the individual," Pickler grunted. "Except for males, but that's more along the lines of roughhousing."

If that meant goblins didn't get hugged as children, in my opinion that explained a lot.

"Well," I muttered. "I learned something today."

"No need to feel bad," she comforted me. "I still have a hard time telling Callowans apart. You're all pale and dark-haired and your accent is horrendous."

I snorted, resisted the urge to clap her shoulder again to say goodbye and went on a holy quest to pilfer my right's hand secret liquor trove.

—

By the time I found her again Nilin was by her side, propped up against a log and warming his feet near the flame. I tossed the tribune one of the bottles and he deftly caught it, popping the cork with practiced ease. The other three were set aside as a reserve while I sat on Pickler's free side.

"I don't even know what they're trying to accomplish with the bickering," the Senior Sapper complained. "All it does is infuriate me."

"Knowing Robber, that's probably half the reason he does it," the dark-skinned boy snorted.

"That's being pretty generous," I commented, allowing myself a little sigh of pleasure at the sensation of sitting down.

I no longer got as saddle-sore as I'd used to when I'd started out riding Zombie, but I still felt the ache at the end of the day.

"He'd be a lot more tolerable if he didn't act so..." Pickler started then trailed off, looking for the word. "So *manly*."

I spat out a mouthful of aragh, handing back the bottle to Nilin as I coughed it out.

"Robber?" I croaked. "*Manly*? I mean, he's my friend, but he's also the sentient equivalent of a pack of walking razor blades."

"That's what a male goblin is supposed to be, Callow," the Senior Sapper sighed. "Vicious, clever, fearless of death. He's our equivalent of the big hairy human who goes around picking fights in bars."

"Now there's a disturbing thought," I murmured, drawing a chuckle out of Nilin.

"Nauk does fall for his provocations too easily," the tribune admitted. "He usually regrets it afterwards, but he can't help himself when it happens."

"He's a sweet man," Pickler muttered. "A little too sweet, to be honest. And he couldn't build a trebuchet if his life depended on it."

I choked. That was her standard for who she kept company with? If they could build a *trebuchet*? I wasn't sure whether that was a goblin thing or a Pickler thing, but I elected to have another swallow of aragh instead of pursuing the matter.

"You could just let them down gently, you know," I said as the warmth burned down my throat. "That should be the end of it. That *better* be the end of it."

A darker note had entered my voice for the last part. It was fine for my officers to express interest in one another, so long as it respected regulations, but continuing after a refusal would have crossed the line into harassment. That wasn't something I had any tolerance for. Pickler coughed and looked away.

"It's, uh," she cleared her throat.

"She likes the attention," Nilin smirked. "And I owe Hakram half a day's pay. Gods, he's never wrong about this stuff."

"You can't have it both ways, Pickler," I said.

"It's different for us," the Senior Sapper admitted. "Our marriages are arranged by our mothers and overseen by the tribe's matron. Having a choice is... refreshing."

When it came down to it, I knew next to nothing about goblin culture. There weren't books about it and people weren't usually allowed into their territory past Foramen – where the vast majority of them actually lived, burrowed into the side of the Grey Eyries. They were a matriarchy ruled by the Council of Matrons, who answered directly to the Empress, but aside from

that? Just general facts. They were the only ones who could make the eponymous munitions and as a species they had an interest in engineering going back since the Miezian occupation. They had a language of their own, though they never spoke it outside their confines of the Tribes and Black had implied that goblins inclined to break that rule tended to disappear. Only a handful of words from it had ever been translated, and records noted that within a generation every identified term disappeared, replaced by another. *There's a reason the chuckles are always a little nervous when Robber makes a Great Goblin Conspiracy joke.* My train of thought was interrupted by a fresh arrival.

"The Deadhand finally graces us with his presence," Pickler greeted my adjutant in a drunken slur, waving the bottle in his direction

The tall orc snorted. "I guess there's no need to ask where my stash of aragh went."

"I requisitioned it for the good of the Empire," I informed him. "Besides, under your mattress? Seriously? That's the first place people look."

"I suppose that's my own fault, for befriending a villain," Hakram sighed melodramatically before claiming the space next to me. "What did I miss?"

"Goblin arranged marriages," Nilin said. "Also, I owe half a day's pay."

The orc grinned. "It's almost too easy fleecing you people."

"I hope you get the ash plague," Pickler muttered under her breath.

Hakram raised a hairless brow. "Worry not, dearest Pickler, I will keep your secrets," he assured her. "... Probably. So arranged marriages, huh. I keep forget you lot do that. Seems unnatural."

"Hakram Deadhand," I mocked gently. "Champion of free love."

"No proper orc would stand for that kind of foolishness," he insisted. "Chiefs who meddle in stuff like that get an axe in the skull."

"Save me the orc pride speech," Nilin moaned. "Nauk already spits it out at least once a day. *My clan could have walked twice that distance in the same time, Nilin. My sister's daughter would have walked that off without a word, Nilin.* I'm starting to think his sister's daughter should be a legion of her own, with all those things she can do."

I grinned at his utterly ineffectual imitation of Nauk's gravelling tones. The Soninke's voice wasn't exactly high-pitched, but it was a far cry from his commander's deep orcish baritone.

"In all fairness," Hakram noted, "we really *are* better than you glorified herbivores."

"Herbivore," Pickler repeated dryly. "Big word you're using, adjutant. Do you need to punch something to compensate?"

"The mighty Clans are ever surrounded by detractors," the tall orc mourned. "You should be protecting my honour, Catherine. Doesn't your House of Light say jealousy is a sin?"

"I wouldn't know," I admitted. "I tended to nap through the more boring sermons."

"That explains a lot," Nilin murmured with a smirk.

"Hakram, defend my moral fibre from the uppity Soninke," I ordered, uncorking a second bottle and handing it to him.

He took a sip. "Tribune Nilin of the Fifteenth Legion," he intoned solemnly. "You have impugned the reputation of the Squire. The sentence for which... is death."

The dark-skinned boy gasped and put a hand over his heart.

"Let me tombstone read that I spoke only the truth," he declared.

A shadow was cast over me, someone leaning over my head.

"The rebels would win this war outright, if they just kept sending us barrels of wine," Juniper opined.

"This coming from a woman who spent the better part of a night trying to convince Nauk to wrestle an ox," I shot back immediately.

"It would have done wonders for morale," she gravelled, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

My legate sat on the log by Pickler, taking the offered bottle without missing a beat. I looked for her usual shadow only to find nothing.

"No Aisha tonight?" I asked.

Juniper growled. "Ratface has been dragging his leg in putting the trades he made in Summerholm on paper. She'll be riding him hard tonight until he does."

I exchanged a look with Nilin, then we burst out laughing.

"That's one way to motivate him, I suppose," Pickler snorted.

"Children," Juniper grunted, rolling her eyes.

"Which reminds me," Hakram said. "The warlock's get won't be joining us."

I raised a questioning eyebrow.

"He was elbow-deep in something's carcass when I went to check on him," the adjutant explained. "I decided not to ask twice."

"Understandable," I conceded.

"But worry not, Boss," he grinned. "We won't be without mage presence tonight. Kilian should be joining us."

I took in a sharp breath and straightened out the mess that was my hair. I really should have washed before coming here. Gods, I probably still smelled of horse. Dead horse, at that. I looked around and everyone was smirking at me.

"What?" I asked, the tone coming out a little defensive.

"I'm sure your hair looks just fine, Catherine," Nilin grinned.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I replied, gathering the tattered shreds of my dignity.

"She *did* ask if you would be there," Hakram gravelled knowingly.

I was not going to smile, not when I was being baited this obviously. Still, hearing that put a warm feeling in my stomach. It was just an infatuation, I told myself. Even if it'd been a while for me, it was just an infatuation.

"Why would we talk about the wasteland that is my love life when we have Pickler's juicier one to dissect?" I replied, shamelessly throwing the Senior Sapper under the chariot.

There was a hoot of delight from the vultures and the conversation turned at the goblin's expense. From the corner of my eye I watched Hakram's skeletal hand close around the bottle and almost frowned.

"You do that a lot," Juniper said.

The legate had moved next to me while the others talked, leaning close enough we wouldn't be overheard.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Stare at the hand, when you think nobody's looking," the Hellhound spoke flatly.

We really need to go over the concept of letting people dodge uncomfortable subjects at some point, Juniper. I knew from experience the orc wasn't one easily put off when she brought a subject up, so I sighed and resigned myself to the conversation.

"Can you blame me?" I asked. "I'm the reason it's there."

The legate rolled her eyes again.

"Lady Squire-"

I cleared my throat.

"Fine," she growled. "Catherine. He's an orc."

"I'd noticed," I replied.

"I don't think you understand what that really means," the Hellhound grunted. "We're not green-skinned humans with better teeth. We're *orcs*."

"And?"

"While human children are learning to read, we're learning to kill. While you're picking up a trade, we're learning to kill. While you're going to pray in your pretty little churches, we're *learning to kill*. War isn't just what we do, Catherine, it's what we are."

The orc rolled her shoulders.

"If we're not fighting the Empire's enemies, we're fighting each other. If an orc loses a hand, it means they were too weak or too slow. Hakram, though? He went up against heroes and came out *stronger* for it. There's not an orc who'll look at those bones and see anything but a mark of pride."

I guessed I'd known that, on some level. My adjutant had never once even implied that he was anything but satisfied with his new hand. But that wasn't the part that really unsettled me, was it? It was that I'd given the order. Maybe not spoken the words out loud, but I'd tacitly sent Hakram to fight the Thief. He wasn't even a claimant, not the way I'd been before becoming the Squire – he just had... potential, almost realized. In the heat of the fight, I'd sent the closest friend I'd made since leaving Laure into a duel with a heroine, knowing very well chances were he'd die in the process. It didn't matter that he saw nothing wrong with that. I wasn't comfortable with what it said about me that when blades came out I could make a decision like that without even hesitating. *But that's on me. It's not their problem to deal with.*

"If it makes you feel any better," Juniper grunted, "you should see the way women look at him now."

I laughed. "It's bad?"

My legate wrinkled her nose. "He's never been one to have an empty bed for long, but it's almost disgraceful how often he gets hit on nowadays."

My grin widened. "Are you telling me *Hakram* is a womanizer?"

The Hellhound nodded, distinctly amused. "He's discreet about it, at least. You ever notice how for such a gossip he almost never talks about himself?"

Huh. I hadn't, actually. Though now that she brought it up, I could see how he tended to steer the conversation towards other people. I knew who his friends were and what clan he was from, but that wasn't much at all. Something to think on. The volume of the chatter rose suddenly and I glanced in the direction of the others. In the middle of the throng, suffering what passed for my minions' sense of humour, Kilian stood. She looked a little overwhelmed by the drunken attention, though she was smiling. Her pixie-cut dark red hair had been freshly combed, by the looks of it, and she seemed to have traded the usual legionary under tunic for more comfortable cotton shirt and trousers. I could not help but notice how they made her legs look even longer than usual, or the fact that her armour hid away rather noticeable curves.

"And I don't want any part of that look on your face, so if you'll excuse me," Juniper gravelled.

I let that go without a response, though I schooled my face into an expression that was a little more appropriate. My legate took back her old seat and everyone else shuffled along, leaving an empty space by my side in what I assumed to be the opposite of happenstance. Kilian promptly filled it, gracing me with a smile.

"Finally found his stash, did you?" she said.

I opened a new bottle and grinned. "Under his mattress, if you can believe it."

"Rookie mistake," the Senior Mage chuckled, shaking her head in mock dismay.

The redhead leaned back against the log, our bodies closer than was strictly necessary. The kick of the liquor wasn't the only reason for the flush on my face, though the pleasant haze of drunkenness kept me in a mellow mood.

"We should have done this more often, back in the College," I said. "With the responsibilities we all have now, we won't be getting chances like this often."

"There weren't as many of us, back then," Kilian replied. "Just Rat Company. It's nice, having the others along."

Juniper was the only one who'd not been with the Rats there tonight, but I took her point. Aisha was good company, when she got that stick out of her ass, and I took a twisted sort of satisfaction out of goading Masego into drinking the hard stuff. Apparently there was no magical cure for a hangover, which made his shambling the following morning a very entertaining spectacle.

"This is all still new to me," I admitted.

Kilian raised an eyebrow. "You didn't go drinking with your friends in Laure?"

"I didn't really have friends, in Laure," I shrugged. "Colleagues, some contacts. The occasional interest. But I didn't quite fit in back at the orphanage, or anywhere else for that matter."

The redhead looked surprised. "But you're one of the friendliest people I've ever met," she protested.

I snorted. "That's overselling it a bit."

"Catherine is convinced she's uncharismatic, for some reason," Hakram called out from the other side of the fire.

"I make enemies a lot more often than I make friends," I reminded him.

Juniper barked out a laugh. "Can't really call it 'making' an enemy, if they were already out for your blood. Foundling, there's not another captain that could have talked their company into following a plan as messed up as the one you pulled in the melee. And the Rats took it on faith, going in blind."

I grimaced. "The company didn't have a lot to lose by listening to me, no offense to you lot."

"There's a difference between hitting the bottom and believing someone can drag you back up," Pickler said. "You were the one with a plan. We all learned to trust in that, before you were done."

Her tone was a little odd and I shot her a quizzical look. Was she still feeling guilty about the way she'd spoken up against me during the melee? She'd had legitimate concerns, even if she'd phrased them unflatteringly. Besides, it was water under the bridge as far as I was concerned. The Senior Sapper had been one the cornerstones of what could be called my "faction" inside the Fifteenth, along with Nauk and Robber. The way everyone was

looking at me was starting to make me uncomfortable so I raised my bottle.

"To taking refuge in audacity, then," I toasted.

There was a round of cheers, some louder than others, and the conversation drifted away. Kilian eventually hummed quietly, looking away from my face.

"So "interests", huh," she said. "Left behind any broken hearts when you got out of Laure?"

"Hardly," I snorted. "I never got into anything too serious. Well, there was that fisherman's son who was getting there, but I broke it off. I was already aiming for the College, back then, staying in the capital wasn't in the cards."

"Oh," she spoke. "A boy. I was under the impression you were..."

The redhead gestured vaguely, though I got the gist of the meaning.

"I'm bisexual," I informed her amusedly. "I've been with people of both genders. I mean, don't get me wrong, girls are nice but there was this boy called Duncan back home who had pecs like you wouldn't believe."

"You're rather horrible at this, aren't you?" Kilian spoke wryly.

Shit. Right. Maybe should have kept that one under wraps. The aragh was not doing wonders for my tact, not that it had ever been one of my strongest traits. I cleared my throat.

"Have you?" I asked. "Been interested in girls before, I mean."

"Only the one, so far," the redhead sighed. "I honestly can't tell if she's not interested or just very bad at picking up on signals."

Oh. Oh.

"Would you like to go for a walk, Kilian?" I croaked out.

"As long as it leads towards your tent," she replied frankly.

"I think that can be arranged," I said, hurriedly rising to my feet.

Well. This might turn out to be an even better night than I'd thought.

Chapter 14: Situation

"Any plan with more than four steps is not a plan, it is wishful thinking."

– Dread Empress Maleficent II

I was in an unusually good mood.

That we'd finally come within half a day's march of where the Sixth and the Ninth were camped was contributing: traipsing around Callow had held an element of novelty for the first few days, but by now I was sick and tired of looking at empty fields. That Hakram was so close to coming into his Name that I could finally feel something coming off of him was another factor. Soon he'd be in a position where any assassin trying to take him on was in for a rude awakening. Yet it would be a lie to pretend that the main reason for my occasional urge to whistle wasn't that I'd been sharing a bed with Kilian for the last three nights. She was usually gone by the time I woke up, sadly, but that was military life for you. We were expected to put up the pretence of professionalism regardless of the reality. Besides, what we got up to before going to sleep more than made up for it. For all that she'd apparently never been with a woman before Kilian had proved to be an, uh, eager and dedicated student. I had a fresh new appreciation for all those ribald jokes about nimble mage's hands.

According to Juniper, the latest milestone our scouting lines had found indicated we were actually ahead of schedule: Black had installed his legions at the village of Harper's Crossing and at our current pace we'd be there before Noon Bell. It was a warm spring day, the clouds were clear and the sky was blue – I'd allowed myself to be tempted to ride in front of the Fifteenth, keeping Nauk and Nilin company. The conversation had drifted towards our coming assignment and the battle inevitably coming with it. Opinions on the fighting strength the Silver Spears would bring to bear were, as it turned out, somewhat mixed.

"Sure, Helike messed up Procer something good during the League Wars," Commander Nauk growled. "But they were under Theodosius the Unconquered. The man was brilliant, could have done the same with a pack of goatherds. He was also a villain. Tyrants are a special breed of competent."

"I think there's quite a bit of difference between goatherds and Free Cities men-at-arms," Nilin replied patiently. "Better armour, for one. Fewer unwholesome entanglements with bovids, most likely – though I'm not putting anything above soldiers if they campaign long enough."

"I'm sure they'd put togas on the poor creatures at least," I opined. "You know how they are about proper dress, down south."

Nauk barked out a laugh and his tribune graced me with a smile.

"That said, I've gotten some preliminary reports from Black," I continued. "At least five hundred cavalry, equipped in the Proceran style. That'll be tricky to deal with."

The large orc grinned nastily. "The Legions handled the knights of the Old Kingdom, Boss. We'll swallow those pretty bastards whole and spit out their bones."

"Poetic," Nilin spoke drily. "And I'll grant you that after Callowan knights every other cavalrymen look like children, but we're not the Ironsides. We don't field nearly enough pike to cover our entire first rank."

"Juniper is of the opinion that if we deploy your ogres in the right place it won't matter," I said. "I'm inclined to agree. Not that their riders are the only challenge they'll offer."

There were three full lines of ogres under Nauk's command, armoured in the thickest plate to ever come out of Foramen and wielding war hammers that were outright taller than me. I knew that because I'd stood next to one and found out with dismay that the crown of my head didn't even reach the top of the shaft. My damnable height aside, the ogres could stop a cavalry charge flat if they stood in front of it. The war hammers would crush through the kind of scale mail cataphracts wore like wet parchment and lances would hardly do more than sting. That said, I'd fought ogres during the melee. I knew damn well they weren't invincible. They got tired like everybody else, and they could be swarmed if the enemy had the numbers to throw at them. Which they did, in the case of the Silver Spears: Scribe's estimates had them at two thousand men-at-arms in addition to the cavalry.

The war doctrine taught at the College stated that a legion could take two-to-one odds and reasonably expect to come out on top if they had a full supply of goblin munitions, but in this case it was different. The Fifteenth could barely field one thousand and seven hundred legionaries, a full company of which would be... unreliable. The Forlorn Hope would have to be deployed carefully, preferably in range of goblin crossbowmen in case they got the wrong sort of ideas. More than that, the Silver Spears were led by a hero. My teacher had promised he'd get me a look at the files both his and the Empress' spies had mounted on this Exiled Prince, but even if he was an incompetent wretch just his being present changed everything. Current Legion doctrine relied on shock and awe tactics to break superior numbers, after all. If the first rank of the enemy host disappeared in a hail of sharpeners and the one behind it was drowned in a wave of fireballs, enemy morale usually got shaken up something fierce.

All that went out the window with a hero in the ranks. As long as the Prince drew breath, no army he commanded would rout. They'd

walk unflinchingly into the grinder and fight like devils until either we were dead or they were wiped out. Captain had told me once that, before the Reforms, no Imperial host took on a Callowan one unless they had them four to one. My own studies of the Empire's chequered military history had illustrated why: there were at least a dozen incidents where a Callowan army brutally outnumbered had made a desperate last stand and managed a miraculous last-moment victory. Amusingly enough, under Terribilis II there'd been an official decree from the Tower forbidding the Legions from giving battle when it seemed like they couldn't possibly lose. *There's a reason the man managed to turn back two Crusades.* A shame that he'd been assassinated shortly afterwards, but that was the way Praesi politics worked: no great accomplishment went unpunished.

"That's what we got you for, Callow," Nauk spoke bluntly. "I'm looking forward to you running that pretentious little princeling down. Hells, I'd take a potshot at him myself if I thought it would work."

"Getting competitive with Hakram, are we?" Nilin teased. "A commander should know better than to open war on multiple fronts – you've already got Robber to deal with."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Nauk grunted. "But I'd like it on official record that you're an insubordinate twit."

"I'll see it done," I promised gravely, lips twitching.

Before I could turn back the subject to our slice of the coming campaign, my attention was drawn to a pair of goblins making their way through the ranks towards us. My vision sharpened with barely a thought and I made out the green markings on their armour indicating they were scouts and not sappers – not that there'd been much of a chance otherwise, since they were coming from ahead of the column. The two of them were male, and relatively young-looking: closer to ten than fifteen, if I had to wager.

"Ma'am," the officer among them saluted. "Commander Nauk, Tribute Nilin."

I cocked my head to the side. "You have something for me, sergeant?"

He bobbed his head. "Sergeant Latcher, ma'am, Second Company. We were scouting the road ahead when we ran into a detachment from the Sixth."

I raised an eyebrow. "We're getting fairly close to their camp, so that's not too unexpected. I'm assuming there's more?"

"Wolf riders," the other goblin muttered. "Ma'am," he added hastily.

I raised a silent eyebrow, waiting for them to elaborate. The mounted orcs covered ground even faster than goblins, it was only natural for General Istrid to use them as a patrols. *Especially after getting her supply line hit by the Silver Spears. She's got to be that much more careful about them sneaking about.*

"They, uh, bring a message from Lord Black," Sergeant Latcher explained. "He's requesting for you come ahead of the Fifteenth. Something about an imminent war council."

I sighed. "He could have mentioned that last time we scried," I grunted. "Still, doesn't matter. Are they still here?"

Latcher bobbed his head again. "They've been instructed to act as your escort."

"Kind of them," I spoke drily. I glanced at my companions. "Looks like we'll have to cut this short. Send a runner to Juniper to tell her where I've gone."

"Duly noted," Nilin replied.

"Have fun," Nauk waved airily.

"My teacher's a lot of things, Nauk," I noted. "Fun is, unfortunately, not one of them."

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The largest of the two inns in Harper's Crossing had been appropriated as the official headquarters for the joint Sixth and Ninth Legions. While it hadn't been fortified – which was considerate of Black – the Blackguards were swarming the entire area, a sure sign my teacher was inside. His faceless guards were never far behind, not even in the middle of a village-turned-fortified-camp. As it happened, when my grim-faced orc escorts left me behind they were surrendering me to an old acquaintance.

"Lieutenant Abase," I spoke up, pleasantly surprised.

The Soninke pushed up his visor and revealed his face, looking mildly exasperated.

"I should have known eventually you'd start telling us apart," he replied. He offered his arm to clasp like he'd taught me what seemed like an eternity ago and I took it. "Good to see you Catherine."

"Same," I replied. "Any reason you lot are out in force today? It looks like you're pulling out all the stops."

"A pair of assassins tried to infiltrate the camp yesterday," he grimaced. "Lady Scribe found them out but they killed themselves before they could be taken prisoner. We're not sure who their target was."

Well, shit. Abase probably wasn't in the loop when it came to Hakram, but I had a pretty good idea who'd sent the assassins and who they'd been hired to kill. The only real question was whether they'd been sent by Heiress herself or by the Truebloods as a whole. I was definitely upping the guard around Hakram's tent, discreet measure or not.

"He in a foul mood, then?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Abase shrugged. "But he's been keeping long hours. I get the impression there are foreign concerns."

"Well, only one way to find out," I murmured. "Take care, Lieutenant."

"Same to you, Lady Squire," he replied with a nod.

The other Blackguards moved aside to let me pass, well used to my presence from the afternoon lessons I'd had in my teacher's Ater estate. The inside of the inn was comfortable and well-lit, but I barely paid attention to it: there were three people inside the common room, seated around a broad table covered in maps and the tidy piles of paperwork that inevitably followed Scribe around. Black rose from his seat when I entered, a smile on his face as he strode towards me.

"Catherine," he greeted me warmly.

I found myself engulfed in a hug I leaned into, against my better judgement. I *had* missed him, much as it pained me to admit it. I didn't have to trust him to like him, and some days it was hard to manage even that much. It didn't help he was obviously fond of me, and though I knew he could fake that easily enough I was almost sure he wasn't. I allowed myself a moment to enjoy the rare display of affection before returning to the present. I was almost as tall as he was now, I noticed. I must have grown without noticing, not that standing higher than Black would be much of an accomplishment.

"Black," I replied, a smile tugging at my lips.

A large hand clasped my shoulder as I drew back and I turned to face Captain.

"Sabah," I said. "It's been a while."

"Too long," the gargantuan woman replied. "Look at you, you went up the better part of an inch."

"Hadn't noticed," I admitted. "My armour still fits just fine."

I glanced at the third villain and found Scribe quietly studying me. She nodded once, then turned back her attention to the report she was reading. That she'd acknowledged my presence at all was already an accomplishment, in my experience. Still, in the back of my mind Ime's warning sounded. *Be very careful around Scribe*, she'd said. *Do not ever let her believe you are a threat to him.*

"Oh my, Sabah," Black murmured. "Look at the lack of tension in her shoulders."

The warrior woman chuckled. "I see it. The Taghreb boy or the redhead?" she asked.

I grimaced. "Should I even ask how the two of you know about that?"

Black raised an expectant eyebrow, declining to reply.

"Kilian," I finally admitted.

Not that I'd ever seriously considered Ratface. He was nice enough to look at, but if he was actually over Aisha I'd plunger my head in a brazier. My teacher raised a hand and Captain cursed, flipping a golden aureus he deftly snatched out of the air.

"Never bet against a redhead," he said smugly.

"It's not like you need the gold," the Taghreb complained.

"Wine tastes better when bought through victory," Black replied easily.

"This isn't exactly the reaction I expected when you learned I'd taken up with someone without a Name," I interrupted.

Better not to let them get started. Captain could bicker with the best of them, when the mood took her, and my teacher was physically incapable of letting anyone else have the last word. Black shrugged indifferently.

"We'll need to have a conversation about risk management later," he said. "But I am not unduly worried. It's not without precedent."

"Wekesa's husband might be a devil," Captain rumbled, "but Amna isn't."

I sometimes forgot Captain was married, mostly because she rarely spoke of her husband. Or her children, for that matter. I'd been rather surprised to learn she had two, her eldest actually a few years older than me. That of all people she'd ended marrying a

minor Taghreb bureaucrat from the Tower had been a shock, though it did explain her occasional maternal leanings. I'd never gotten the entire story of how it came about, though given how private of a woman she could be that was to be expected.

"I'm guessing you didn't send wolf riders out for me just to discuss my love life, no matter how much gold you had riding on it," I finally spoke up. "The messengers mentioned a war council?"

"Take a seat," Black said. "There will be a briefing with Istrid and Sacker later tonight, though we'll wait for your legate for that. The council was an excuse to get you here early."

I frowned. "Do we have a problem?"

"You might say that," he replied. "There were developments abroad."

"Ominous," I commented. "Been a while since someone has been so vague at me."

The pale-skinned man's lips twitched, though the amusement was short-lived. Sabah idly adjusted her belt, then looked askance at Black.

"Go ahead," he said. "We're having her over for dinner anyhow."

Sabah clapped my shoulder again. "I have business to attend to," she said. "I'll see you later tonight."

Had she come just to greet me? That was oddly touching, in a way. I nodded back and watched her walk away.

"The Principate is assembling a host," Black told me, claiming back my attention. "We've had several reports confirming that Klaus Papenheim will be leading it."

"The First Prince's uncle," I mused. "Prince of Hannover, right?"

"Correct," he agreed. "Arguably her staunchest supporter, as well as one of her best generals."

"You think they're making a play for the Vales while we're busy here?" I asked. "I thought she had domestic matters to deal with before she could."

"I think he's headed south," the green-eyed man replied. "To the Dominion."

Levant, huh. It wasn't a nation I spent a lot of time thinking about. It was on the other side of Calernia, and considering it was surrounded by the Principate and the Titanomanchy it was unlikely we'd ever have to fight them. I did know they had

several axes to grind with Procer, from back when their territory had been a fresh three principalities added to the Principate by force of arms. They'd rebelled with Ashuran backing and since built the Red Snake Wall, which made their northern border more or less impossible to cross.

"She's not trying to conquer them again, is she? I thought she was supposed to be some sort of political mastermind," I said.

"I doubt it will come to open war," Black spoke. "But they've been making trouble in Orense. She needs to settle that before turning her attention elsewhere."

"And the Dominion is going to be impressed by a few thousand footmen standing around awkwardly?" I snorted. "Their wall would *literally* eat them if they tried anything."

"It would if they assaulted it," the Knight replied. "That won't be the case. She's had the fleets of all sea-side principalities mobilized."

"They have to be charging her through the nose for that," I pointed out.

"Her treasury can weather it," Black said. "It might be a different story if she went on a protracted campaign, but she won't have to – the mere threat of landing an army past the wall will be enough to give Levant pause."

"So she's bluffing?" I frowned. "That strikes me as a costly gambit to run."

"The Principate is the second wealthiest nation of Calernia, and at the moment they have more coin to spare than soldiers," the green-eyed man noted. "There's also the fact that throwing around that much gold will go a long way in convincing the Dominion she's willing to pull the trigger if she has to. That her own uncle heads the host will only further that impression."

"The Majilis has met on the subject already, though the official reason for the session was another one," a quiet voice contributed.

I glanced at Scribe, who'd put down her quill while speaking.

"That's the Dominion's equivalent of the Highest Assembly, right?" I frowned, scrabbling for what little I'd learned about Levant's political system.

"Roughly," Black conceded. "Their official head of state is more a spiritual leader than a temporal one. Every city has their own ruler descended from one of the heroes that originally founded Levant – together they form the Majilis and choose the Seljun by

consensus. Unlike the Principate, however, they have no real nation-wide policy. The ruler of Vaccei is the one who's been testing Orense's borders."

"She has no support in the rest of the Majilis," Scribe murmured. "They voted against censuring her, but she's aware she would be standing alone. She'll have to swallow her pride if the First Prince pushes hard enough."

I hummed. "That's troubling, though I don't see why you needed me to come ahead of the Fifteenth to learn it."

Black ran a finger along the surface of the table.

"Because when Levant backs down, Hasenbach's last foreign liability will be Helike. Which she'll be able to muzzle through a vote of the League, when she gathers enough allies in the Free Cities."

I raised an eyebrow. "And that means?"

Black's lips thinned in displeasure, though it was not directed at me. "Our timetable in Callow has changed. The rebellion must be over before summer is over, or we may very well be facing a war on two fronts."

Chapter 15: Council

"If you can't play to your strengths, play to your enemy's weaknesses."

-Marshal Grem One-Eye

I could feel the eyes of the crowd on us as we strode towards the tent Black had told me about.

Legionaries from the Ninth with the traditional red streak of paint across their throat watched us pass, letting whispers bloom in our wake. The men and women from the Sixth were friendlier, orcs most of all. Tall greenskins with the scrawled iron-grey rib on their armour that served as the unofficial symbol of the Ironsides saluted and waved, though most of that friendliness was directed towards Juniper. That she was General Istrid's daughter had been a mostly well-kept secret back at the College, but out here? My teacher had mentioned once that Knightsbane tended to boast about her prodigious daughters when she got into her cups, and the evidence of that was all around us. Hakram formed the third member of our little clique, accompanying us more because of his Name than his position. Masego had been extended the same invitation, but he'd decline without missing a beat. Something about preferring counting ants to inflicting a session of military planning on himself, since at least there was some sort of scholarly value to the former. I didn't particularly mind:

he'd be joining me for dinner with Black and Captain anyway, so if anything urgent came up I could brief him then.

The murmurs of "Deadhand" and "Adjutant" that usually greeted Hakram's appearance in front of legionaries were notably absent, which I took to mean Black had clamped down on the rumours here.

Unfortunate that it in no way meant that word wouldn't reach Heiress, if it hadn't already. *A problem for another day, that.* The last I'd heard of the prettier of my archnemeses – was that the word? I found it hard to believe that I was the first villain to have multiple sworn enemies, there was bound to be a specific term – she'd landed a mercenary force in southern Callow and taken the city of Dormer. That had been two months ago, though, and I knew better than to think she'd have remained idle that long. Undoubtedly she would soon make an attempt to fuck me over in some unexpected way. It was a shame there were no real assassin guilds left in the Empire, because with the way my general's pay had been stacking up I might actually be able to afford putting a price on her head. There was bound to be something possible to arrange from Mercantis, but I had no contacts in the City of Bought and Sold.

Entering the tent first, I pushed aside the cloth and found we were the last to arrive.

General Istrid was already hitting the wine, if the cup in her hand was any indication. She still looked like someone had carved an orc out of old leather, and that striking scar on her face pulled up her mouth in a permanent mocking grin. General Sacker, on the other hand, was seated on a high stool. I would have thought the sight of the small wrinkled goblin perched on the top of the wooden frame comical, if not for those yellow half-lidded eyes that missed nothing. Black was leaning over the table, looking over a map, and didn't bother to glance up as I came in. My orc bookends followed a heartbeat later and Istrid's face lit up at the sight of her daughter.

"Squire," she greeted me almost absent-mindedly, clapping my shoulder as she passed me by and fell upon her daughter like a particularly affectionate pack of wolves.

"June," she gravelled. "Look at you, all grown up in the kit. It feels like yesterday you were playing knights and legionaries with sticks."

"Mother," my legate barked, looking mortified.

I bit my lip and glimpsed the ghost of a smile on my teacher's face. Hakram gave the whole thing a wide berth, but from the glint in his eyes I knew every Rat Company officer was going to have heard the story before morning.

"Yes, yes, you're a legate now," Istrid grunted, smoothing the hair on her daughter's head gently. "Very serious. Have you been eating enough? Your cheeks look hollow."

They did not, in fact, look hollow in any way. I decided to take pity on the Hellhound and cleared my throat.

"General Istrid," I said. "A pleasure to see you again."

I turned to look at Knightsbane's goblin counterpart.

"General Sacker," I added.

"Foundling," the general of the Ninth replied drily. "Istrid, stop fussing over your spawn. You're embarrassing yourself."

The scarred orc withdrew, throwing her colleague a dark look.

"I was doing no such thing," she denied.

The goblin rolled her eyes. "Legate Juniper, Adjutant, welcome."

"General Sacker," Juniper replied, gathering her verbal footing.

A wicked glimmer appeared in the goblin's eyes.

"Whatever happened to "Auntie Sacks"?" she asked.

"I was four years old! It was a hard word to pronounce!" Juniper keened in dismay.

Gods, I hadn't even known she could blush that green. Hakram leaned in close to me.

"This is the mother lode of blackmail material," he whispered, grin splitting his face. "I will never have to suffer a speech about gear cleanliness again."

Black cleared his throat, and everyone fell silent.

"Entertaining as this is, we do have a briefing to attend to," he said.

Juniper's blush deepened, if anything, and she gave him the bastard cousin of a curtsy. I goggled at the sight. A curtsy? From the *Hellhound*?

"Lord Black," she murmured.

My teacher nodded a greeting at Hakram, smiled at me and bid us closer. I took a look at the map – it covered the whole of Callow, though the word itself was nowhere in sight. A bronze figure of a knight had been placed over Vale, another one where the eastern side of the Hengest lake met the Waning Woods and a

third on the crossing linking the county of Marchford to central Callow. The Silver Spears, unless I was wrong. A silver legionary figurine had been placed over Dormer and a pair of the same over the rough location of the village we currently stood on, north-east of Vale.

"We've been in contact with the mercenary bands under the employ of the Heiress," Black announced and I forced down a scowl. "They intend to move on Baroness Dormer's host before the week is done."

Reaching for a second victory when I had yet to win my first one. Fucking Heiress. Juniper eyed the map pensively.

"Do we know how many soldiers she's fielding?" my legate asked.

"Roughly four thousand," General Sacker spoke in that quiet way of hers. "No cavalry. About half is light infantry, Proceran exiles from their southern principalities."

"And the rest?" Hakram gravelled.

"A full Stygian phalanx," Black replied.

"She's using slaves?" I spat out. "That's illegal under Tower law."

Sacker's face was inscrutable, but I could see vicious anger lurking in the face of all orcs present. Soninke and Taghreb had suffered under the Miezan occupation, but they'd never had entire clans clapped in chains the way orcs had. When Dread Empress Maleficent had founded the Dread Empire, the outlawing of slavery had been one of the things she'd used to bring the Clans into the fold – and even over a thousand years later orcs hated slavery with an almost frightening intensity.

"Technically the territory held by the rebels is not Imperial ground, on a legal basis," Black noted. "Regardless, she has 'freed' them."

The disdain he put in the word rang loud and clear. Nominally granting the Stygian war-slaves their freedom meant absolutely nothing, when they'd been indoctrinated from birth to obey their orders of their owners without fail. I resisted the urge to spit on the ground.

"At least it has to be putting a dent in her coffers," I said. "Even if she only pays half of them, keeping two thousand mercenaries on payroll has to be draining no matter how rich you are."

"It would," Sacker croaked out, "if they were paid entirely in wages."

"She's allowing them to pillage," Juniper cursed. "Burning fucking Hells. That whole corner of Callow will despise the Empire for generations."

"She can't be doing any of this under an Imperial banner," Hakram pointed out. "She's acting as a private citizen in this."

"Yeah, like that'll change anything," I grunted. "All the locals will remember is that a Soninke was giving the orders. Black, why hasn't the Empress reined her in?"

The green-eyed man's face went blank. "The political situation back in Ater complicates the matter. Malicia has given authorization to discipline them if they act out when under shared command, but as long as she's on her own her hands are free."

Istrid spat to the side, much to my amusement.

"Politics should stay out of wars," she growled.

So that was where Juniper got it from.

"Regardless of her undesirable behaviour," General Sacker spoke, "she's tactically useful, at the moment. Dormer's army can't link up with Countess Marchford as long as she's threatening their flank. That keeps them to a manageable number."

"Twenty thousand, right?" I frowned. "At least most of them are levies."

"Marchford has only two forces that could match a legion on even grounds," Black said. "The core of two thousand dwarven heavy infantry in her main force and the Silver Spears."

"Never read anything about dwarven troops," I grunted. "Juniper?"

"The last known skirmish involving the Kingdom Under was when the principality of Iserre diverted a river into one of their mining operations," Juniper spoke in a baritone. "Contemporary reports are unreliable, but they seem to have been more than a match for the prince's standing army."

Oh, I'd heard about that. The dwarves had retaliated by sinking the Old Iserre underground and wiping out the surviving population. It was the reason most Calernian nations had laws forbidding provocation of the Kingdom Under.

"That was what, seven hundred years ago?" Hakram gravelled. "Nobody's scrapped with them since? That information has to be outdated."

"The drow in the Everdark have clashed with them on occasion, but any information coming out of that rathole is unreliable at

best," Black said. "Regardless, we should expect their armour, weapons and training to be at least a notch above our own."

Not to mention they'd be even more physically robust than orcs and at least partially resistant to magic. Tough customers.

"Keeping them paid, on the other hand, must be costing the Principate a fortune," the Knight smiled viciously. "Not to mention their... creative notions regarding private property."

Everybody shared a grin at that. Dwarves were of the belief that only dwarves could actually own things – which meant, in essence, that taking said things from other people wasn't thievery or in any way morally reprehensible. There'd been a famous incident in Callow where a Duke of Liesse's family jewels had been taken by a visiting dignitary and the Kingdom Under had refused to just give them back. The poor bastard had to buy them, emptying half his duchy's coffers in the process. If they were camped in the middle of Marchford's army, I hoped for her sake she'd locked away the silverware and nailed down anything she wanted to keep. Otherwise it was likely to disappear underground forever.

"The dwarves are our problem," General Istrid grunted. "You girls – and you, Deadhand – are going to have to mop up the Silver Spears."

Black's fingers drummed against the table's surface.

"The defensive part of this campaign is over," he announced. "We're going on the offensive on all fronts. While Heiress catches their attention we'll move on Vale, though I fully expect the Countess to retreat when we do. That makes it a priority for you to either wipe out or box in the Silver Spears. If the rebels continue their scorched earth tactics as they retreat south, our supply train must be secure. We court disaster otherwise."

"Yes sir," I murmured, starting when I realized Juniper had done the same.

"Our last sighting has them in the vicinity of the old ford the city of Marchford was named for. They destroyed the bridge a few days after declaring their rebellion, so you'll have to secure it to cross," General Sacker spoke mildly.

"Have we confirmed their numbers?" I asked.

"Their run-in with Captain cost them some officers, but their effective strength remains the same as the last report I gave you," Black replied. "Scribe suspects they have more than one hero in the ranks, and our failure to scry them so far suggests they have a priest of some talent along. Considering the close ties of the Helikean royal family with the House of Light, that is almost a certitude."

"I'll keep that in mind," I muttered, mind already racing.

"I want the Fifteenth to occupy Marchford itself, afterwards," Black continued. "Having a legion pay a visit to her demesne will turn up the pressure on the Countess. She's been careful to avoid meeting us on the field so far."

"You intend for us to remain and garrison the city?" Juniper asked.

Black shook his head. "After re-establishing Imperial control I want you to march back to us as fast as you can. Afolabi will send troops after you're gone. Ideally I'd like the Fifteenth to be present when we engage the Countess."

"Sounds like plan," I grunted.

It wouldn't be that easy, of course. I'd learn to expect complications by now. But it was the outline of a course of action, and for now that would have to do.

—

Dinner was pleasant, but most of us had duties that prevented us from lingering. Still, when Black invited me up to his rooms for a conversation, I did not decline. We had several conversations long overdue, and it would be a while before we were in the same place again. There was a fireplace and two armchairs, the one I claimed usually occupied by Captain if the size of it was any indication. He poured me a cup of wine after doing the same for himself, cool touch of the metal contrasting the heat coming off of the fireplace.

"On the subject of your paramour," Black said, settling into his seat.

I snorted. "I think the word you're looking for is "girlfriend"," I told him.

The dark-haired man wrinkled his nose. "No, I'm quite sure it wasn't. Regardless of semantics, I'm sure you suspect I had people dig into the lives of all the people you work closest with."

"I thought that was pretty much a given, yeah," I admitted.

There'd been a time where the concept of my teacher invading the privacy of my friends would have irked me, but I'd left that kind of naiveté behind. My enemies had deep pockets and they were out for blood: having someone like Black watching out for liabilities was almost reassuring. While we'd never had a conversation on the subject before, none of my officers had suddenly disappeared into

the night. I took that to mean they were reliable, or at least without open motive to betray me.

"Your cadre of senior officers has an unusually high loyalty index," he noted. "Juniper's family ties make her a given. Senior Sapper Pickler is the daughter of the matron for the High Ridge tribe but they are estranged. Hasan Qara, who you know as Ratface, is openly feuding with his father – a member in good standing of the Truebloods. Aisha Bishara is fifth in line for a lordship sworn to Kahtan but she's had no real contact with dangerous elements. We have little hard knowledge on Commander Hune, but ogres typically stay out of politics. Still, someone to watch. Commander Nauk has made several... *enthusiastic* public statements in your support, though about half were made when inebriated. He's also wanted for murder in Thalassina."

I blinked. "Murder? *Shit*. What happened?"

It wasn't like he could be arrested anymore – enrolment in the Legions wiped your criminal record clean, even allowed you to change your name like Ratface had – but it distressed me I hadn't even suspected.

"An altercation with a Taghreb merchant," Black replied. "The man struck him and your own went into the Red Rage."

I grimaced. "He must have been young. He doesn't lost control like that anymore."

The green-eyed villain hummed in disagreement. "Emotional states are more likely to trigger an episode than physical pain. It's one of the reasons berserkers can force themselves into the state. That flaw makes him unreliable as an officer. You'll have to be careful how you deploy him on the field."

I grunted, not quite willing to agree out loud even if he was probably right. Nauk had been in my corner since the beginning, in one way or another, so thinking of him that way rankled. As for the murder... I'd been on the receiving end of some of the more racist leanings of Wastelanders, so I while I was unwilling to excuse the act I could understand where he was coming from. That he'd had no real control over himself after going into the Rage was an objective fact, and that the merchant had apparently resorted to physical violence first blurred the lines a bit. And yet. *Murderer, huh*. Most of the time I got along with orcs better than humans: the way they looked at Creation wasn't simpler, not exactly, but it was *clearer*. Less cluttered. It was all too easy to forget it was also brutal. All in all, it might not be a bad thing to have my teacher hand me a reminder of that.

"Hakram?" I probed.

"An oddity, that one," Black replied. "Howling Wolves clan, one of the students sent to the College on Imperial scholarship. Average grades except in Old Miezán, where he failed repeatedly – and yet some of the best marks on record when it comes to practical exercises. Noted by his teachers to have exceptional organisational abilities."

"All stuff I already knew," I pointed out.

Or had suspected, anyway. His record since the creation of the Fifteenth spoke for itself. Black waved a hand in irritation.

"No real political affiliations to speak of, not even in his clan. He did spend a lot of time in the College socializing with officers from other companies, which should come in useful for you down the road."

I'd been aware since the beginning that one of the War College's functions was to forge connections in the people meant to become the next generation of the Empire's military leaders, but I'd never found it in me to play that game. Oh, I'd drawn most of Rat Company into the fold and managed to establish an understanding with Juniper's crowd but the bulk of the cadets had still been strangers to me by the time I'd stopped attending. Part of me regretted the lost opportunity, but I'd had bigger fish to fry. None of them would be in a position to be useful to my purposes for a few years anyhow, though Hakram having made contacts was a pleasant surprise. *They might not have authority, but even as junior officers they'll have access to information.*

"Keeping the best for last?" I prompted.

"Kilian of Mashamba. Her grandmother rode with the Wild Hunt until encountering her grandfather. Specifics are sparse on how she died, but the fae rarely last when too far from Arcadia. Joined the College on the Imperial ticket after qualifying at the local school. In the top twenty students for the mage track, though her lacking endurance disqualified her from more advanced spellcasting classes."

I frowned. "The wing thing, you mean. That's not entirely fair. She can't shove as much magic into her spells but she's got much better control than any other mage I've seen."

Black raised an eyebrow. "That was not a criticism of her abilities. It simply means she has a ceiling she cannot overcome when it comes to heavier spellcasting: she'll never be able to change the course of a battle like Wekesa or Masego can."

Not entirely accurate – if she could call down a lightning bolt on an enemy general that would certainly affect the course of a fight – but I grasped his meaning. Kilian wasn't the kind of mage

who'd ever be able to wipe out an enemy battalion with a single spell.

"So there's no red flags in her background?" I insisted.

"Her family is poor," Black noted. "She's arranged for half her pay to be sent to them on a permanent basis. There's possible leverage there, though there has been no sudden uptick in their financial situation: if she's been bribed, she's been careful about it. Her parents have been subject to less discrimination by local authorities recently, but that might simply be a result of having sent a child to the War College. It's being looked into regardless."

"That's a no, then," I replied.

"Nothing as of now," the dark-haired man conceded.

He poured himself a second cup of wine, offering me the same when he saw mine was mostly empty. I nodded – I didn't have anything else planned for the night, nothing wrong with having another few. He took a sip of the sour red, humming in appreciation at the taste.

"Your involvement puts her in a great deal of danger," he finally said. "Any villain or more pragmatically-inclined hero will make a point of targeting her to get to you."

"I know," I sighed. "But at this point pretty much everyone I'm close to is on someone's kill list. Let's not pretend Heiress wouldn't see all my senior officers dead in a heartbeat if she could manage it."

"Allowing your enemy to dictate how you live your life is unwise," Black agreed. "Yet awareness of the danger is not enough. If you don't take concrete steps to mitigate the threat awareness means nothing."

"I've had people watching over Hakram," I told him. "I'm thinking of making that guard permanent. Extending that to Kilian shouldn't be a problem."

"Forming your own personal guard so that they can handle security details should be a priority," the green-eyed man said. "But that is a purely reactive way of thinking."

"We're in the middle of a war," I replied flatly. "I can't just take back the Fifteenth to Praes and start kicking down Trueblood doors."

"It's a pattern broader in scope than just this particular situation," Black said. "Look at your tactics dealing with the

heroes in Summerholm. While I will not gainsay your results, from the outset you ceded the initiative to the enemy."

"They were already set up for an ambush when I arrived," I pointed out.

"Interrupting the plans of your opponents is almost always better than letting them interfere with yours," the Knight spoke. "I understand that making quick, improvised decisions is one of your strengths and that the unpredictability it lends you has come in useful, but in the long term that will not be enough. You need to start anticipating problems instead of merely solving them."

I grunted. "I get what you're saying, sir, but I'm not like you. I'm not a... mastermind, or whatever you want to call it. I see things that need to be done and I do them."

"Learn to be," Black replied bluntly. "If you ever want to rise high enough to accomplish what you intend, you'll need better than you currently are. A ruler must be more than someone who stamps down flames wherever they flare up."

He sipped at his cup.

"If you keep concerning yourself with symptoms instead of causes, eventually an opponent will land an unexpected blow – and you'll lose someone dear to you to grasp the same point I am trying to get across."

The green-eyed man smiled thinly.

"I learned that lesson the hard way," he told me. "I would prefer that you did not have to."

Sentences like that were why it was so hard to dislike Black. When the priests in the House of Light had spoken of how seductive the Dark could be, I'd always thought they meant ambition and greed. Lust, even, given how good-looking villains could be. Maybe the honest affection that sometimes showed behind my teacher's words would have failed to take in a better person, but at the end of the day I was not that girl. I'd gone my whole life without and father or mother figures and while Black certainly didn't fit the bill for either, I'd underestimated how easy it would be to become attached to a mentor. Someone who looked out for me, who genuinely wanted me to live up to my potential. Oh, what he wanted for me was a terrible thing. There was no denying that truth. But it also had the glint of greatness to it, and there was something horribly tempting about that.

"You ever been in love, Black?" I asked suddenly.

"I hope you're not implying your infatuation with the mage is anything of the sort," he replied with a raised eyebrow.

"You're not going to give a "love is weakness" speech, are you?" I frowned.

"I am not in the habit of preaching things I do not believe," he said.

I leaned back in my seat, enjoying the warmth of the fire.

"I know I'm not in love with Kilian," I admitted. "I don't think I've ever been with anyone. Not the kind of love the songs speak about, anyway. That's the problem, I guess. It feels selfish to put her in danger for something this... shallow."

"She's a grown woman," Black said. "She can make her own decisions."

"You're the one who just told me a ruler needs to be *more*," I replied. "I know she's not coming into this blind, but there's a part of me that feels like I should make the decision for her own good anyway."

He chuckled and I turned to glare at him but found his finger pointing at me. He poked my forehead gently.

"Human," he reminded me. "Villain, but still human. It's all right to want things for yourself, Catherine."

"Even if it hurts other people?" I asked.

"Everyone hurts," he replied. "That is the nature of human condition. Thousands die all over Creation with every breath we take, and nothing either you or I can do will change that. All we are is what we do with that truth."

"I don't want to be the kind of person who hurts others for her own sake," I admitted quietly.

"There's nothing righteous about martyrdom," Black spoke, tone thick with distaste. "How gloriously they die on their pyres, those blessed few who think themselves above all of... *this*. And yet what do they really accomplish? Refusing to accept reality for what it is instead of what you think it should be is not being high-minded, it is cowardice. I take no guidance from someone whose crowning achievement is their own death. Sacrifice solves nothing on its own. It is no substitute for the labour needed to change things, just an easy way out."

I'd never seen Black like this before. There wasn't a trace of the easy-going, sardonic mask he liked to affect, but the cold monster of logic I'd glimpsed in Summerholm was nowhere in sight either. There was a quiet intensity to him, the weight of genuine belief. And some parts of what he'd said resonated with me. Wasn't that the core of my disagreement with the Lone Swordsman?

He believed that people should be willing to die for a kingdom, where I believed a kingdom should be willing to die for its people. But there was something missing here. The string that would keep all that barren cynicism together.

"There is such a thing as the greater good," I replied. "It's an ugly ideal, I'll grant you that. Means there is such a thing as accepting lesser evils for a purpose that goes beyond them, and I've always found that a bitter pill to swallow. But there are things worth sacrifice – yours and other people's both. Heroes are wrong, I think. I'm worth just as much as everybody else. My losses matter just as much as anybody else's. But villains aren't right – we don't matter *more*, just because of who we are."

Black smiled strangely, still staring into the fire.

"I am the wrong person to debate matters of morality, I think," he replied. "The truth of it is that I am the most selfish man you'll ever meet, and I've yet to lose so much as a night's sleep over it. But you asked me a question."

He let out a long breath.

"Yes. Once."

"How did it end?" I asked softly.

"It has yet to," he smiled. "She is... an exceptional woman, in many ways. I wish I could see her more often."

I hummed. "And you've never been worried your enemies would try to get to you through her?"

He bared his teeth in a jackal's grin.

"I pity anyone fool enough to try."

I polished off the rest of my cup, letting the taste linger in my mouth. Silence stayed between us for some time as we simply let the heat of the fire wash over us. I opened my mouth, then closed it. What I wanted to say wasn't wise, exactly. But my instincts were telling me I should, and they'd seen me through all the messes in my life so far.

"I had a talk with Warlock, in Summerholm."

"Not a pleasant one, I suspect," he murmured.

I snorted, though the amusement was short-lived.

"The Empress summoned me to the Tower before I left Ater."

"And?"

He seemed rather unconcerned by the prospect, which shouldn't have surprised me. He and Malicia were supposed to be thick as thieves, and though I'd started to notice fractures in that relationship there were still decades of trust to back it.

"It occurs to me," I finally said, "that I don't actually know what you want."

He smiled mirthlessly.

"That," he said, "is a complicated question."

Wry amusement quirked my lips. I'd replied the same thing to Malicia, when she'd asked me the same question. Maybe there was something to those supposed similarities everyone kept yammering about. He rose to his feet and I frowned.

"Going somewhere?"

He shook his head, heading for the trunk next to his bed and popping it open. He dug around the inside for a moment before fishing out a pair of books. Not, not books – journals, I saw. Neither of them had a title on the spine, but they were well-worn. He handed them to me.

"I don't think the answer is something you could understand, right now," he told me.

It would have sounded condescending if not for the fact that he seemed to genuinely believe what he said.

"And those are?" I asked, raising the journals.

"Information I compiled when I was three years older than you are now, shortly after I became the Black Knight and gained access to the Imperial archives," he replied.

"Everybody with permission from the bureaucrats can access those," I frowned.

"The real archives," he specified. "The ones in the underground levels of the Tower."

Of course there were secret archives. I rubbed the bridge of my nose in exasperation. I really should have seen that coming. I thumbed one open, seeing columns of numbers and names stretching down the page. Census population numbers, crossed with reigning Tyrants and some other measure I didn't recognize. The other one seemed to be a children's book, transcribed in my teacher's handwriting. There were notes in the margins, though I didn't bother to look at them right now. I'd take my time doing it later, a cursory reading wouldn't give me much. Still, I had to ask.

"Children's tales?" I questioned.

"The most important part of any culture's literature," Black murmured. "The lessons you are taught when you are young are those you carry with you the rest of your life."

He leaned against the back of his armchair, eyes drawn to the flame again.

"You should get back to the Fifteenth, Catherine," he said. "Dawn always comes sooner than we think."

Chapter 16: Trust

"Treason is more art than act."

-Dread Emperor Traitorous

I tightened the belt around Kilian's armour, leaning in to place a kiss on the side of her neck. I felt her smile as she grabbed her helmet, half-turning to catch my lips with her own. The metal of her legionary cuirass was cold but I could almost feel the heat and softness of her underneath – it was all too easy to imagine the curves I'd taken such pleasure in unwrapping not an hour past under my hands again. She had such soft skin, for a soldier. The redhead withdrew to catch her breath and leant her forehead against mine.

"If you start that again I'll be late for the briefing," she murmured.

"Tempting," I admitted. "But I suppose I'll have to let you go for now. You'll be back afterwards?"

Her smile turned a touch wicked and she nudged my nose with her own, playfully biting my lip.

"Can you think of a better way to work out all that tediousness?" she asked.

"I genuinely cannot," I mused, grabbing the helmet out of her hands and carefully sliding it over her head.

She adjusted it so it wouldn't tangle her hair – though her own pixie cut made that a trivial matter compared to the mess that my own long locks could turn into – and I tied the straps together. The redhead turned to grin at me.

"By your leave, Lady Squire?" she teased.

"Out," I smiled. "Before I change my mind."

"Ma'am," she saluted with a grin, sashaying out of my tent.

How she managed that while wearing fifteen pounds of metal was beyond me, but I wasn't above enjoying the sights. I waited until she was gone before turning to the wooden folding table that served as my desk and the two books still on it. Four days has passed since the evening Black had given them to me, and I still wasn't sure what his intent had been. The children's tales were, apparently, just that. There did not seem to be a hidden meaning to them. Oh, they were interesting enough on their own – they were very different from the tales I'd been raised on – but they weren't anything I couldn't have found in any bookstore in Ater. Unlike the other manuscript my teacher had not annotated it, though it was still in his handwriting. The lessons it taught were... strange. There was a formula to most Callowan fairy tales, patterns that could be found if you looked. First the hero or heroine's character was established, then they were presented with a problem. A catalyst ignited the struggle against that problem, and the hero's fight changed them in some way. Through victory the resolution came, and the state of affairs for the future was established: the ever-famous happy ending, most of the time, though even Callow dabbled in the occasional tragedy.

Praesi went at it differently. The initial stretch of the story, where Callowans would establish the virtues that would carry the hero through the story, was dedicated to establishing the ambition of the protagonists. A warlock who wanted to build a tower reaching the sky, a soldier wanting to conquer an invincible fortress. Never once were those ambitions spoken of as being overreaching hubris: the urge to be *more* was always praised. One of my favourite tales as a child had been the Fearless Lass, a young girl who went out in the world to learn fear and after many misadventures only found it after she married a king and put a crown on her head. In Black's book, though, every single protagonist was born with that fear in them. The awareness that no matter how clever and powerful and ruthless they were, eventually they would be unmade. The stories all ended with defeat, either at the hands of a hero or by the betrayal of someone they loved. It was the opposite of a happy ending: there was no sense of permanence to it. Taghreb tales were particularly brutal in that regard, the most striking example being the story of "The Well in the Sands". A young tribeswoman trying to dig a well in the desert so her tribe would not die of thirst. After tricking rival raiders, stealing the gold of a Soninke lord and capturing a goblin to dig for her, she finally managed it. Her whole tribe drank – and the morning after, found the well had gone empty. *Victory, most fickle of friends*, the moral went.

Was that what he was trying to make me understand? That eventually, villains always lost? *Is that why you chose now of all times to pick a Squire, because war is knocking at the Empire's door?* Malicia certainly seemed to think so.

My instincts told me there was more to it than that. That he'd given me a second book only made me more certain of it. There was a story to the other manuscript too, though not written in words. The first column that stretched across the pages was, I'd found, a series of population censuses undertaken by the Tower. Not all Tyrants had bothered to take those, so there were blind spots, but most of the Empire's span was covered. They were cross-referenced with the name of the Emperor or Empress who'd reigned at the time, and the wars they'd fought in – either civil ones or attempted invasions of their neighbours. The last column's meaning still eluded me. It measured an area in square miles, that dropped sharply after the reign of an early Dread Empress and then remained more or less the same. No hint was given as to what exactly it was supposed to mean. Still, there was at least one pattern easy enough to notice: all the most productive periods in Imperial history, when Tyrants had undertaken great building projects like the road network and the great forges in Foramen, had come in the wake of a lost war. The Tyrant who failed was overthrown or assassinated and their replacement put Praes in order for a few decades.

So the Empire was easier to govern after getting losing wars. If that was true, then the implications were worrying. Praes hadn't lost a war since my teacher became the Black Knight, about forty years ago. *But that would explain a lot.* When we'd had the war council with Istrid and Sacker, Black had said that the political situation in Ater made it impossible for Malicia to just recall Heiress regardless of the trouble she was causing. *The Empire's getting harder to keep together.* I closed my eyes, sighed and killed the candle on my desk. That complicated my own plans a lot. If Praes collapsed into civil war, there was no certainty the Empress would come out on top. The Truebloods were racist aristocratic pricks but they weren't *stupid*: they wouldn't pick a fight they didn't think they could win. Keeping Callow as a semi-independent vassal state under Malicia's Praes was one thing, but under someone like Heiress? No. I'd rather raise a flag in rebellion than allow that. *But if I did, would the Fifteenth follow me?* Parts of it would, I thought. Nauk, Hakram, likely Ratface. Kilian. Juniper, though... Juniper believed in the Empire. Maybe not the people in it, but certainly the institution. And Aisha would follow her. Where Hune and Pickler stood in this remained to be seen.

So far I'd been willing to take things slow, but that time looked like it was past. If civil war did erupt, I needed to be sure what I'd have to work with – and that meant finding out where the loyalties of my officers lay. Black had told me start taking the initiative, hadn't he? Start solving problems before they blew up in my face. Drumming my fingers on the hilt of my sword, I frowned. Well, there was at least one problem I could check on right now.

—

The tent where Hunter was kept had a full line of guards on it at all times, as did the chariot we kept him in when we were on the move. At least four legionaries were watching him sleep at all times, with orders to slit his throat the moment it looked like he was waking up. How much good that would actually do if the hero actually returned to consciousness was arguable, but the precaution had been so basic it seemed ridiculous to me not to take it. Masego checked on the spells keeping him asleep every morning and every night, checking them for lapses or imperfections – not that there were likely to be any, given that they were Warlock's work. The legionaries saluted as I arrived, stepping aside to let me in. Apprentice himself was leaning over the sleeping form of Hunter, wearing the leather apron I'd first seen him in above his riding robes. He was peering at what appeared to be empty space through his spectacles.

"Masego?" I prompted.

"We have a problem," he, braids shaking as he turned towards me.

My hand instantly dropped to my sword.

"Not the Hunter," he spoke after a moment.

I glared at him. "Could have led with that," I said.

He blinked in surprise. Social skills, I realized not for the first time, were not the mage's strong point.

"Oh, I can see how that might have sounded alarming," he mused. "Funny."

"The spells are fine?" I confirmed as patiently as I could.

He waved airily. "Yes, he won't be waking up anytime soon. Not that I'm not looking forward to handing him over to the representative from Refuge anyway."

Black had scryed me the day after our departure from Harper's Crossing to inform me he'd been in touch with the Lady of the Lake. She had not, in fact, sent a hero out to kill her old friend Warlock. She'd given specific instructions otherwise, actually, and was rather displeased Hunter wasn't in the Free Cities like he was supposed to be. She'd be sending another of her pupils to pick him up and bring him back to Refuge, where he'd be tried. My teacher had implied said trial wouldn't really be anything of the sort: the sole dispenser of justice in Refuge was the Lady of the Lake, and the only law she'd set down was *do what I say*. I was looking forward to getting rid of the liability, though I would have much preferred for it to happen before we marched into war. I had an itch to take care of the

risk permanently, but my instructions otherwise had been made very clear. It wasn't something I was willing to fight Black on, not for now. He'd maintained my authorization to put Hunter down if the hero was trying to escape, it would have to be enough.

"A problem?" I finally prompted.

"Possibly," he hedged. "I felt someone scrying earlier. Did you have one of your mages try to find the Silver Spears again?"

"No," I frowned.

Whatever means the mercenaries had using to shield themselves from Black's mages, it worked against mine too. I still ordered regular attempts, but that was before we moved out at dawn.

"Didn't think so," he shrugged. "It connected somewhere down south, anyway, so the direction was wrong."

My eyes sharpened. Callowans didn't field mages in armies the way the Legions did, and there was no indication the Countess Marchford had changed that habit. I did, however, know of someone in southern Callow who was bound to have brought a few with her.

"Did you manage to listen in?"

Masego shook his head, the silver trinkets woven into his hair catching torchlight as he did.

"They used a modified formula and I only caught on just before they broke off contact," he explained. "Good work, and subtle. I wouldn't have caught it if I weren't already examining the spells on our sleeping friend here."

I swore. It had been a given Heiress would have plants in the Fifteenth, no matter how good Hakram's screening process, but if one of them was a mage then it was worse than I'd thought. Passing word through physical messages was one thing and the time lapse meant I'd still have a degree of surprise on my side, but if she could check in regularly? She'd know exactly where we were and what we were up to. I doubted she was in a position to ambush us with her own troops, either physically or politically, but there were a hundred ways she could make a nuisance of herself.

"I did, however," Masego continued, "manage to ferret out where the connection was made on *both* sides."

I smiled unpleasantly. "You can find who was speaking to them?"

"I can narrow down the area to about a dozen feet," Apprentice replied. "The rest you'll have to find on your own, which shouldn't be too hard: a formula like that will require very specific equipment."

My fingers tightened around the grip of my sword. I opened the tent's flap and called one of legionaries closer.

"Get me Hakram," I ordered. "And tell him to assemble a full line."

I turned to Apprentice, who was eyeing me with a raised eyebrow over the rim of his spectacles.

"Let's find our rat," I said.

—

"Blackspear clan," Hakram spat. "Should have known. Not a spit of loyalty in that blood."

Two legionaries held down the struggling orc, snarling back when he showed his teeth. Masego already looked bored with the whole affair. He'd created a glowing red thread out of thin air after my adjutant and Lieutenant Tordis' line had arrived, following it all the way to one of the ten-man tents in Hune's kabili. All ten legionaries had been inside and they'd been made to stand at attention while we rifled through the insides. Tordis herself had found the polished metal circle covered in runes that had been used as focus for the scrying — the spy had tried to run when he'd realized, but he'd been tackled down before he could make it even three feet away.

"Return to your tent," I ordered the others. "And don't speak a word of this to anyone. The whole matter is under seal, by my authority as the Squire."

The informant had been the sergeant of the tenth, as it turned out. Not a War College alumni, one of the legionaries from the regular recruitment camps. He'd kept that he was a mage under wraps, apparently, because he wasn't on the roster as one of Kilian's. I glanced at Hakram.

"Let's take him somewhere private," I said. "I have a few questions to ask Sergeant..."

"Asger," Tordis told me. "Sergeant Asger."

Said sergeant seemed rather displeased at the idea of getting dragged out of sight and managed to wrench out a hand. He started an incantation, but I was having none of that: my armoured boot impacted his mouth and I heard his jaw break with a wrenching sound. The boot came down a second time and he was knocked out cold.

"Apprentice," I spoke calmly. "I'll need you to fix that jaw before we interrogate him."

The Soninke mage rolled his eyes. "You sure you don't want to get a few more kicks in first?"

I raised an eyebrow. "No, but feel free if you are so inclined."

I saw Hakram's lips twitch from the corner of my eye and the legionaries who'd been holding down Asger picked him up, glancing in my direction for instructions. As it happened, there was a supply tent not too far away: my adjutant oversaw the informant's tying up and Masego set up a privacy ward without me needing to ask. Considering who'd raised him, I supposed it must have been habit by now. I ordered Tordis and her line to stand guard outside while Apprentice got to work fixing the sergeant's jaw enough that he could speak.

"Do we know who he was talking to?" Hakram gravelled.

"Not for sure," I admitted. "But he was talking south, and we both know who's down there."

He growled

"One of these days," the tall orc bit out, "I'm going to stand on that woman's grave and smile."

A common sentiment, that. Apprentice stepped away from Asger and nodded when I sent a questioning look his way. He leaned back against a crate of barley bread, to my surprise. I would have thought he'd want to be done with this as quickly as possible, but it looked like curiosity had won out this once. I stepped forward and kicked the prisoner awake. The orc came back with a hiss of pain, glaring at us hatefully.

"Sergeant Asger," I spoke pleasantly. "It has come to my attention that you've been engaging in unauthorized scrying rituals."

"No idea what you're talking about," he spat. "I'm not even a mage."

"Masego?" I prompted.

The Warlock's son peered at the orc through his spectacles.

"Definitely a mage," he noted. "Though a fairly weak one. Orcs rarely produce casters of a decent calibre."

"And that's your first lie of the evening," I said in an even tone. "I'd advise you not to speak a second."

"Fuck you, Wallerspaw," he replied, baring his teeth.

"Watch your godsdamned mouth," Hakram growled in Kharsum.

"Look at you, *human's pet*," Asger mocked in the same. "Another Howling Wolves slave serving the masters."

"You are a shame even on what passes for your clan," my adjutant retorted.

"Yeah, let's spit on the Blackspears again," the sergeant laughed. "It's done well for you lot, hasn't it? Wolves and Red Shields and Waxing Moons – favourites of the Praesi, even those who *play* at being Praesi."

Howling Wolves for Hakram, Red Shields for Juniper and Waxing Moons for Nauk. Was he really throwing a fit because there was no Blackspears clan member in my senior officers? It wasn't like there weren't any high placed officers belonging to them period – Morok was a Blackspears and he was a tribune in the Fourteenth, last I heard.

"You're not here because of what clan you were born to," I broke in, before the situation could degenerate even further. "You're here because you've been passing information to Heiress' people."

"Allegedly," Masego said. "It has not yet been established as fact."

I shot him a quelling look. Now was not the time to get pedantic on me.

"May you kill each other and spare us your work," Asger, pausing only to spit in the dirt.

He was not, I noted, denying it.

"Who was your contact on the other side?" I asked.

"Your mother, Wallerspaw," he mocked.

"I'm an orphan, actually," I informed him. "That said, I don't have all night to indulge you."

I took a deep breath and reached for the wellspring of power inside of me. The beast opened its eyes, coiling around me and baring its fangs.

"**Tell me**," I Spoke.

Asger tried to keep his mouth closed but inch by inch it snapped open.

"Fadila Mbafeno," he gasped. "May you choke on her her bones."

Masego let out a little surprised noise.

"You've heard of her?" I asked.

"One of the better noble mages from our generation," Apprentice said. "Old blood, sworn to Wolof."

The city Heiress' mother ruled over. That was probably as close to confirmation as I was going to get.

"Do you know of other spies in the Fifteenth?" I questioned with a frown.

"Everyone you love," Asger grinned, but he'd hesitated for a heartbeat.

"I do dislike repeating myself," I grunted. **"Answer the question."**

He screamed in anger but the words got out anyway.

"There is another. Turned in Summerholm," he choked out. "Don't know the name. Or anything else."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"More than one, most likely," Hakram grunted. "Gold opens more doors than keys."

"I'll set up a trip ward over our camps from now on," Masego spoke. "If they're a mage, I'll be able to catch them scrying."

If they were not, however, ferreting them out would be much trickier. Unlike Black I didn't have a Scribe to direct agents to watch all the dark corners of Creation. *I don't have anywhere as large a charge to watch over either, though.* Regardless, I'd need to stop depending on the information fed to me by my teacher eventually. Now was good a time as any to start setting the groundwork for that. *But until then the Fifteenth is a barrel with a hole at the bottom, leaking out information all over the Empire.*

"So what am I to do with you now, Sergeant Asger?" I murmured.

"The sale of military information when the Empire is in a state of war is high treason," Hakram growled. "The noose for him."

"If you keep him alive, you might be able to pass false information through him," Masego pointed out.

Could I, though? Could I actually keep this quiet enough Heiress wouldn't realize I'd caught her informant? It wasn't like I could just let the sergeant return to his tenth after this. And though I'd put this incident under the seal, word would spread. It was impossible to make an arrest like this without *someone* noticing, even at this time of the night. Before the week was done word would have spread through the entire Fifteenth. Even if the spies didn't know each other's identities – which I assumed to be the

case – there would still be suspicions as to *why* Asger had been arrested. It might be notable enough to pass either way, and there was no telling if Heiress had given instructions to report any and all arrests. Which I would have done, in her place. *Then let's presume she has.* If none of the other spies were mages, or if they were too scared to scry after tonight, then I might still manage to pass some false information before Heiress caught on.

"The advantage that could give us is too minor to go through all the trouble of keeping a liability like him around," I finally said.

"I see how it is," Asger sneered. "When your Callowan buddies do it they get the soft death or your special company, but if it's a greenskin? Slaves who misbehave get the noose."

"You're right," I admitted, and Hakram started in surprise. "I've been too soft on people. And things like this will keep happening as long as I continue. So I'll start correcting that error with you."

I glanced at Hakram.

"Have Tordis' men take him. He hangs at dawn, before the entire legion."

—

I was too restless to return to my tent afterwards.

I took a walk around camp, stopping to talk with the sentries, then made my way out. Juniper has chosen a place close to a hill for us to stop today, the kind of low slope that occasionally dotted the landscape of this part of Callow. It was a half-moon out tonight, and I breathed in the night breeze with a sigh of pleasure. The camp might not smell as bad as a city, but the stench of nearly two thousand soldiers was not something to dismiss out of hand. I was amusing myself by picking out the constellations in the sky when Hakram found me. I heard him long before I saw him, even with my Name vision – my adjutant was a lot of things, but stealthy was not one of them.

"I've had the scrying tool handed over to Apprentice," he told me without bothering with a greeting. "He says he might be able to make something of it, given enough time."

I hummed in acknowledgement.

"I've had a melody stuck in my head, these last few months," I said. "I just recalled a verse from it."

I looked up at the night sky and recited the lyrics.

*"The first step is hardest, they said to her
You will have to walk through fire
It will burn away what you once were,
And always devour whole a liar."*

"Never heard it before," Hakram admitted. "Though the melody does sound familiar."

"I can't remember where I heard it," I admitted. "Silly thing to be bothered over, I guess."

"I wouldn't say that," the tall orc replied, coming to stand besides me.

We enjoyed the silence for a long moment, the wind stirring my hair.

"Tordis' line," I spoke suddenly. "They're trustworthy?"

"As can be," he agreed.

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"I'm transferring them – and her – to your direct command. I have a job for you."

"Hunting rats, is it?" he said.

"All of them, Hakram," I murmured. "I want all of Heiress' informants found. I don't know what she's planning, but I fully intend to set fire to that fucking plan and shove the ashes down her throat."

"Looking forward to it," the orc gravelled, tone low and fierce.

I let out a tired sigh. I could feel, deep in my bones, that we were standing on the edge of a precipice. Not just with the Silver Spears, though I had a feeling I'd be feeling the aftermaths of that battle for the coming years. Here, on this hill, I had to make a choice. *Trust him or not.* He was my friend. Of all the people I'd met since leaving Laure, he was perhaps the only person I'd give that title to without quibbling. But like Juniper had pointed out, how much did I really know about him?

"Why did you join the Legions, Hakram?"

He chuckled, the sound like rocks being ground to dust.

"That's not the question you're really asking," he said. "What you mean is *what do you want out of the Legions?*"

I did not deny it. I felt him smile.

"I didn't have dreams, when I was a kid. I learned to fight because that's what we do. I was clever, I suppose, so the chief picked me for College and I figured – why not? The company fights weren't interesting but they weren't boring, and some of the classes were worth the time. Then one day I looked around and realized I was about to graduate. It scared me, Catherine, because I was going to become a soldier and there was nothing I wanted to fight for."

I glanced at him and saw his eyes were hooded under the moonlight, lost in remembrance.

"It's not a problem we usually have, you know," he spoke. "Needing a reason to fight. They always tell us it's in the blood. But it isn't, for me. I don't get the battle-joy when smashing some poor bastard's face in. Still, I was prepared to just... drift through the rest of my life."

He shook himself, as if waking up.

"Then you arrived. Some slip of a girl with a fake name, who looked defeat in the face and decided she would win anyway," his lips stretched into a grin. "You had blind spots, though, needed someone to cover them for you. I did, and it made me realize I'm *good* at this."

He waved, encompassing everything and nothing.

"So I followed and I watched. It was during the melee that I realized half the Empire would rather set the table on fire than let you have a seat – and they expected to win, too. Don't they always? Sooner or later, better blood wins out. We mongrels are only ever meant to bow."

His skeletal hand tightened, grinding against the hilt of his sword.

"The presumption makes my blood boil," he growled. "It makes we want to *crush* them, cut through them with fire and sword down until there's nothing left but wails and a field of ashes. It doesn't really matter, if you end up making the world better or worse with your plans. I just want to break the odds, to bring down the ceiling on their fucking heads."

The tension went out of him as suddenly as it had appeared and Hakram laughed, the sound delighted.

"And so, at last, I am an orc."

I breathed out. There were things I could have said, promises I could have made, but all of them meaningless in the face of the brutal truth he had offered.

"I spoke with Black, the other night," I spoke instead. "He told me he's the most selfish man I'll ever meet, and I know him well enough by now to know he meant every word. I should have been repulsed by that, but I wasn't. Underneath all the rationalizations I think I'm just the same."

There'd been a time where confessing that would have stung, but I was no longer that young. No longer so set in the ways of my childhood, when death had been a sin instead of a method.

"When I was younger, I looked at how Laure was falling apart and wondered why no one was doing anything. Why they were just trying to squeak away a living around the mess instead of fixing it. For years, I wanted there to be a hero who came in and offered salvation. But no one came. Then I got older and started to hear the rumours, about how they did come – and died, having accomplished nothing."

I close my eyes.

"That's when I realized that nothing was ever going to change, if I just waited for someone else to step up. It's not that I think I've been chosen, Hakram. I haven't. *I choose.*"

I bared my teeth at the moon in a defiant rictus.

"I am no longer willing to let someone else decide my fate for me, not even for my own good. I despise the idea with every fibre of my being. And if I don't trust them with my own life, why would I trust them with anyone else's? Why would I entrust them with the land of my birth?"

The sentence had been spoken softly, but for all that it resonated clearly. Treason often did.

"I could dance around the words, call it a reform or a takeover of the system – but the truth is simpler. I want to rule Callow."

It felt strange, to finally say it out loud. All these years I'd avoided even thinking it, the concept too close to selfish ambition for comfort.

"For my sake. For everyone else's. And so I will break anything, anybody who gets in my way," I admitted quietly. "Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation."

Hakram met my eyes and then slowly, with all the inevitability of a great tree falling, knelt. The breeze ruffled the tall grass in the fields below us, shiver and caress both. His silhouette looked unearthly in the moonlight, more faerie than orc.

"Warlord," he rasped.

A promise. An oath. I clasped his arm and hoisted him up.

"Adjutant," I replied, and in that same moment it became the truth.

And so it ended. And so it began.

Chapter 17: Aplomb

"In war, begin as you would end."

– Marshal Nim

No campfires tonight – it would give away their location too easily, not that Seneca's dogs weren't already on the trail. Ranker's goblins were proving invaluable in keeping an eye on how closely the High Lord's household troops were following them, her small warriors made light of foot and hard to find by years of raiding the other tribes. The enemy had somehow managed to block Apprentice's scrying, something the dark-skinned man told Squire meant they likely had a mage of more than middling talent with them. The green-eyed man had expected as much: Seneca's pockets ran deep and so far he hadn't proved shy about shelling out the gold to see this little company of theirs dead. The High Lord was the Chancellor's creature to the bone. They were six hundred strong now that Ranker had joined them, the raiders of the Blackfoot tribe coming to swell the ranks of Red Shields and Grem's Howling Wolves. Not even half a Legion, but it would grow in time. If they survived the night.

"I don't like the odds on this one, Squire," Grem grunted from his side.

The one-eyed orc was chewing on what looked like dried meat, sitting on a rocky outcropping.

"We've got as many warriors on the field as they do," Istrid replied with a hard look. "If we run when we're this close to our backyard, One-Eye, we'll never live it down."

"We'll still be living, at least, which isn't guaranteed if we give battle," the scarred chieftain of the Howling Wolves told her. "Numbers might be even, but a third of our number is goblins. That changes things – no offense meant, Ranker."

"None taken," the small yellow-eyed Matron replied, her tone flat. "I'm inclined to agree with you, if anything. A High Lord's personal retinue is not something to trifle with."

"And yet we're going to crush it," Squire said, and though his voice was calm there was something about it that gave all of them pause.

The man's pale skin made him look like a ghost in the moonlight, his armoured silhouette casting shadows against the rocks. He looked up at the stars while he played with the clay ball he'd appropriated earlier, feeling the weight of the gaze of the followers he'd assembled settling on him. Apprentice laughed quietly, a grin that was all malice stretching his full lips.

"You have a plan, of course," the mage spoke up. "So go on, my friend, amaze us with your latest bout of madness. Are we going to argue with a dragon again? I have to say, that was one of my favourites."

"Good thing it wasn't a long conversation," Cursed tacked on in that matter-of-fact way of hers. "I didn't like the way it was looking at me."

Squire scowled. They had nothing to complain about, it had worked out perfectly fine in the end.

"All of you are here because you want to change things," he told them instead. "The Empire is the culmination of over a millennium of defeats – time after time we try the same plans with new faces, somehow expecting that this once it will be different. That this once, we'll beat them, bring down the king and scatter the knights and send the wizard packing back to his tower. Aren't you tired of losing? I know I am, and I've just begun."

He met their eyes one by one, gaze unflinching.

"It's always going to be this way, you know," he told them. "One uphill battle after another, the odds stacked against us a little worse every time. If we give them a fair fight, we'll lose – it's as simple as that."

The green-eyed man smiled, and it was a wicked thing.

"So let's cheat," he said, lazily throwing up the clay ball and catching it. "There's a new age coming, and we're going to drag them into it – kicking and screaming, if necessary."

A handful of grim smiles was his answer, and somewhere in the back of his head he felt Fate laughing. Let it. He'd be the one to get the last laugh.

"You want a plan, Apprentice?" he said. "We're going to play with fire."

My eyes blinked open wearily, the sight of my tent's ceiling greeting my return to consciousness. No light was filtering through the slit in the goat skin walls, meaning I'd once more woken up before dawn. The bed felt empty without Kilian in it. We'd been together for less than a month, and already I missed the intimacy of a warm body by my side whenever deprived of it. I

slipped out of my bedroll and pushed myself up to my feet, padding across the ground to reach for the carafe of water someone – Hakram, most likely – I had left on my bedside table. I poured myself a cup, downing the liquid in a single gulp to shake myself completely awake. Unlike with regular dreams there was no need to be afraid that the memory of the one I'd just had would become less clear with time: I knew from experience it was as good as branded into my mind. I'd be able to examine it at my leisure afterwards. And there were quite a few tidbits to examine, weren't there? They clay ball that the younger version of my teacher had been playing with was the easiest detail to figure out: they were standard issue in the Legions now, filled with goblinfire.

The Fifteenth had been issued half a wagonload before we'd left Ater, and I knew that Ratface had gone behind my back and traded some of our extra rations for more. How exactly he'd managed that I had no idea. Supply requisitions were a bureaucratic nightmare even when the Legions *weren't* on an active campaign, so likely bribery had been involved. Hakram had been right: Ratface might be a middling tactician at best, but when it came to securing supplies he had a way of getting results. I'd have to call my wayward quartermaster out on it at some point, of course, even though I rather approved of the initiative – we needed firepower more than we needed the extra rations they'd replaced. But it wouldn't do to let him get into the habit of doing things like this, not without running them by me first. *Better I deal with it than delegate the job to Juniper. I don't want to quash his initiative entirely.*

"Squire," a familiar voice gravelled from outside my tent, "you decent?"

I rolled my eyes at that. For an orc, Hakram had surprisingly genteel notions about propriety. The orphanage I'd been raised in had been crowded enough that being half-naked in front of people I was unfamiliar with left me indifferent. Anyhow, with spring not yet in full swing this part of Callow got chilly at night – I always went to sleep dressed, since claiming wood to start a personal fire struck me as something of a waste.

"I'm wearing pants, if that's what you're asking," I replied, somewhat amused.

"I suppose that will have to do," Adjutant grunted back, slipping inside the tent.

His appearance hadn't really changed since the night he'd fully come into his Name: he was still one of the tallest orcs I'd ever met, taller than Nauk even if he wasn't as broad-shouldered. Dark green skin and dark eyes, with a small scar on his right cheek he'd told me was from a hunting accident when he'd been a youngling. Most of the changes had been mental – he'd been calm

since the moment I'd first met him, but ever since he'd become the Adjutant he'd become positively serene. Like he knew exactly where he was meant to be, and was standing in that very place. I envied that, in some ways. Certainty was not a luxury someone in my position could afford.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" I asked as he gravitated towards the fold-up chair closest to me.

"Don't need as much sleep anymore," he told me.

Huh. I hadn't known Roles could do that – I'd noticed fairly early after claiming my Name that I could have a sleepless night and function anyway, but that wasn't the same thing. I was just better at dealing with tiredness than the average mortal, I still needed a good night's sleep to be at my best. Captain and Black had been the same, from what I'd noticed. And as for Scribe... well, I wasn't actually sure Scribe ever slept. I'd never seen her idle once in all the months I'd known her.

"Had another of those dreams, have you?" Hakram asked me with a knowing look.

I raised an eyebrow.

"How can you tell?"

"You always look like you've been given an answer and twice as many questions, afterwards," he replied.

A fair enough assessment, I had to concede. The dreams that came with my Role tended to be relevant to what I was doing at the time, though admittedly the chronology of them could be a little tricky. I hadn't seen Ranger or Scribe in any of them, for example, and I was pretty sure the Heir was still alive in the period I'd just glimpsed.

"I believe I just saw the birth of the Legions of Terror as we know them," I admitted after a moment of silence.

Hakram blinked in surprise, then let out a low whistle.

"You saw the Battle of the Burning Cliffs? They still tell stories about it, you know," he said.

"They do?" I replied, surprised in turn.

The battle hadn't seemed like as big of a deal as the people behind it, to be honest, but then Captain had warned me more than once that things had been very different in the Empire before the Reforms.

"It's how Knightsbane and One-Eye got the Clans to back the Black Knight in the first place," Hakram told me. "A High Lord's

household troops wiped out to the last man in a single night? It was unheard of. If they could do that with two warbands, everyone wanted to see what they could do with twenty – or a hundred.”

I let out a thoughtful noise.

“Didn’t actually see any of the battle,” I admitted, “just the moments before it. It was enough to make me think.”

“Now there’s words to send a shiver up a warrior’s spine,” my Adjutant murmured. “Think about what?”

“They all wanted something, and they started following Black because he was the best way to get it,” I said. “So what do the people who follow *me* want?”

Pouring myself a second cup of water, I reached to do the same for him but he shook his head.

“Juniper wants to be the next Marshal,” I told Hakram. “Nauk wants a war. Masego mostly wants to see interesting things and Ratface wants his father’s head on a pike. I don’t know Hune or Pickler well enough to even guess.”

“Pickler wants to test all the designs she’s been fiddling with since she was a kid,” Hakram gravelled. “Hune, I have no idea. She doesn’t have any friends that I know of, and she kept a low profile even back at the College.”

I sipped at my glass. Too many questions, too few answers. I needed to get a better read on my officers before making any sort of move, and I was starting to run out of time. I needed to be ready by the time the Liesse Rebellion ended, and Black had told me we had a hard limit on that. Dawn’s first rays were starting to poke through my tent’s entrance, and in silence the two of us got started with our day. There was work to do, as always.

—

It had rained during the night.

The ford Juniper had picked out as our way across the river had swelled to knee-deep, with a current that could be tricky to manoeuvre. Still, it would have to do: the only bridge across the Left Fork had been destroyed and my scouts had been reporting more and more sighting of horsemen keeping an eye on us. We were getting close to the Silver Spears, and I had no intention of allowing them to dig in behind the walls of Marchford. I allowed the rest of the troops enough of break to fill up their canteens and rest their legs as First Company started to cross, climbing down from Zombie gingerly as they did. Massaging my legs, I allowed myself a discreet grimace after making sure no one was looking in my direction.

"You regretting that fancy horse now, Callow?" the voice came from behind me, and I turned to offer Nauk a half-hearted glare.

"Is that any way to talk to a superior officer, Commander?" I replied, rolling my eyes at the wide grin I got for my trouble.

The spectacularly large orc had continued to call me "Callow" even after my Name had become common knowledge, though he'd dropped the military rank when we'd finished with the War College. It wasn't a mark of disrespect, Hakram had assured me – if anything Nauk was one of my more fervent supporters among the Fifteenth – so I'd never seen the need to take issue with it. Besides, watching Juniper get on his case for lack of decorum was always good for a laugh.

"We got any word from Robber and his minions?" he asked as he plopped himself down on a half-soaked log close to me.

I frowned, shaking my head. I'd told Commander Hune to send a line of scouts across the ford half a bell ago to see if there were any nasty surprises ahead, and they were about due to report. The three muddy hills the crossing led into made it hard to get a good look at what was ahead, besides the thick woods that flanked either side of the road. Keeping eyes ahead would be key here: the Silver Spears were heavy on cavalry, and they could move about a lot faster than we could.

"Hellhound on the trail," Nauk grunted suddenly, and I glanced in the direction he was leaning his head towards.

Juniper was headed in our direction, Masego and Hakram at her sides. As usual the grim-faced legate walked like she had been blessed with a higher purpose, eyes always sweeping around her to look for any flaws in our legionaries' kit. I watched as she stopped to chew out a dark-skinned girl for having strapped her sword-belt incorrectly, suppressing a smile when Hakram rolled his eyes behind her. Moments later Juniper was standing in front of me, offering a cursory salute before starting to speak.

"I had the heavies set up in front of the ford in case the enemy decides to pay us a surprise visit," my Commander said, skipping the polite small talk. "We also have a picket at our back in case they've managed to find another way across the river."

I let out a noise of approval. It was satisfying to see that the girl who'd played us like a fiddle during the College war games was still as sharp now that we were in a real campaign.

"We'll need to cross soon regardless of whether Robber's back or not," I told her. "There's only so much daylight we can afford to waste if we want to keep up with the Spears."

"Agreed," she grunted back. "Though we should be careful: he might be late because he's run into the enemy."

Neither of us needed to spell out that if that were the case there was no need to expect Robber back at all. If his scouts had been caught on foot by a mounted patrol, there was only one way that engagement could reasonably be expected to go. Scouts weren't sappers: they did not carry enough munitions on them to stop horsemen for long.

"Send another tenth ahead to see if they're coming back," I decided after a moment. "We get moving right after."

She nodded, snapped off another salute and headed off to see it done.

"I hope you don't also expect me to salute," Masego drawled. "I have a medical condition that makes it next to impossible."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Is it the same disease that makes you think you're funny?" I asked

"Ah, it's a cruel woman that leads us my friend," the dark-skinned boy told Hakram, dramatically laying a hand over his heart.

Adjutant grinned.

"Were you talking again, warlock's get? I tend to tune out the background noise."

Masego's brows rose.

"And here I thought you were just a good listener. Truly, my life is a comedy of errors," he commented. "And speaking of my failings, Squire, I'm afraid that my scrying still won't go through."

"Wizard or priest, you think?" I asked.

"Priest, I'd put my hand to fire on it," he grimaced. "That could get tricky when we give battle – some of them can have magic slide right off of them if they want it to."

"As long as knives still work, we'll be able to deal with the problem," I muttered absent-mindedly.

It was becoming clear that Black had sent me after a bigger fish than I'd thought. Just their numbers in cavalry with a Named hero at their head would have been bad enough, but if they had casters too they would a force to be reckoned with. Not that my legion was without teeth when it came to that aspect of warfare. We had

a fairly decent mage contingent – led by a very cuddly redhead – and Apprentice was worth another twenty mages by himself . I'd yet to see anyone match the likes of the ice spell he'd used in Summerholm. In the distance I could see the Fifteenth shaking itself awake from its rest, Juniper sending the heavies across the ford while the sapper companies slung their munition haversacks back across their shoulders. I eyed my still-saddled horse with a sigh.

—

The better part of an hour passed before we got word back from the scouts.

The last of Hune's companies was halfway through the ford, the rest of the Fifteenth splayed over the hills in a wide arc. Standing on top of the tallest of the hilltops, right by the standard, I'd been in the middle of a discussion with Hakram about the night's camping site when movement by the north side of the woods drew my attention. The party we'd sent to find out what had happened to scouts emerged from the trees, a handful of dishevelled goblins among them. I felt my stomach drop: I could only see a few from the original line I'd sent, and it looked like no one else was coming. Robber went straight for the standard, ignoring the murmurs in the rank and file as he made his way towards me as far as he could. I wasn't the only one to see him, apparently: Juniper was by my side in a matter of moments, and before the goblin tribune made it to the top of the hill Nauk and Masego had already joined us. I would have preferred Hune being here too, but she was personally supervising the company that had yet to join us.

My fingers tightened when I got a closer look at the tribune: Robber looked like he'd been rolling through a pile of brambles and dead animals, which wasn't all that unusual, but the barely-restrained panic in his eyes was another story. The goblin thrived on chaos – the only times I'd even seen him in a truly good mood was when he was about to spring a vicious trap on someone. It would have been enough to make most people wary of him, but I had a handle on the way Robber's mind worked: as long as I gave him someone else to focus his malevolence on, he'd never be *my* problem. Given how many enemies I'd managed to accumulate in my short tenure as Squire, I rather doubted it would ever become an issue. I let him catch his breath for a moment before speaking up.

"Tribune," I prompted. "Report."

"We're fucked," he grunted, wiping blood off his cheek.

He added a hasty "ma'am" at the end of the sentence after seeing the look on Juniper's face.

"It's good to see war has left your usual good cheer unaffected," I replied flatly. "But I'm going to need more detail than that."

He ran a still-bloodied hand on top of his hairless head, either not noticing or not caring about the black trails he left on it.

"We found your mercs easy enough," Robber spoke. "Problem was, they also found us."

I grimaced. There was really only one explanation for why he would have come back with four men when I'd sent him out with a full line, but still I'd... hoped.

"Where are they?" I asked.

There'd be time to feel guilty about sending those legionaries to their death later. Until then, all I could do was make use of the information they'd given their lives for to make sure the same didn't happen to the rest of my legion.

"About half an hour away," the yellow-eyed lieutenant said. "And Boss... I don't know where you got your info on their roster from, but it's way off. The two thousand foot is there, but Clapper said she counted at least eight hundred horse. Maybe more."

I let out a curse at that, and from the look on everyone's faces it was a shared opinion. I rubbed the bridge of my nose, running through my options. Was it feasible to retreat back across the river? *No, not if they're this close.* It would be disastrous if the Fifteenth got caught while it was spread between the two banks.

"They planned this," Juniper soberly said, breaking me out of my thoughts. "They were waiting for us to cross so they could force an engagement with our backs to the river."

Masego cleared his throat daintily.

"As the only one here who hasn't had military training, might I inquire as to why exactly that's making everyone look so grim?" he asked.

"If they hit our lines hard enough – which they definitely have the numbers for – they'll be pushing us into the river one step at a time," Hakram told him. "That would be... bad."

The dark-skinned mage's face retained its pleasant smile, but I could see it had gotten a little too stiff. Apprentice might not have been an officer, but you didn't have to be one to grasp Adjutant had been understating things.

"Go get yourself healed, Robber," I finally said. "We'll need anyone who can hold a sword for this one."

He looked dead on his feet and odds are it had come close to being more than a look. The green-skinned sapper saluted, but when he met my eyes I saw there was something lurking under the fear I'd glimpsed earlier. He was furious, the kind of vicious fury that twists your stomach until it bubbles up to your face.

"You gonna get them for this, Callow?" he asked.

Juniper was halfway to hoisting up by the scruff of his neck, the expression on her face thunderous, when I raised a hand to stop her in her tracks.

"I promise you this much, Robber," I told him. "They'll pay the long price before the day is done."

Whatever it was he was looking for in my eyes, he found it.

"Good," he murmured with a hard nod.

I watched him scuttle down the hill for a moment before turning my attention to Juniper, who looked like she was only barely managing to refrain herself from speaking. *I thought we'd already taken care of that.*

"I gave you permission to speak freely when the Fifteenth was formed," I told her. "I don't remember taking that back."

The legate bared her teeth, and from the corner of my eye I saw Masego discreetly taking a step back. Wise man, Masego.

"There's a reason we have ranks, Squire," Juniper growled. "You let them talk like that to you every time their buddies die and the authority breaks down. He's not your friend, he's your soldier. Soldiers die, *it's what they do.*"

Nauk looked about to speak up but Hakram caught his eye and shook his head. Good. His little feud with Robber had been amusing back at the College, but out here I had no patience for it.

"If I wanted to run a regular legion," I said, "you'd be right. As it happens, I have no interest in running a regular legion."

The tall orc opened her mouth, but I pressed on.

"Regular legions don't win battles like the one that's coming, Juniper. And this isn't the last time we'll be facing odds like these. You think Black raised the Fifteenth because we needed the manpower? We're going to be the tip of the spear in this war. And the next. And the one after that," I spoke flatly. "If Robber ever oversteps his bounds with me, it's not you he'll have to be afraid of – you can be sure of that. But what I want out of all of you, I'm not going to get it by flogging people who look me in the eye."

"Hear hear," Hakram spoke softly from my side.

There was a long, tense moment and then Juniper inclined her head.

"My apologies, Lady Squire. I spoke out of turn," she said.

"You spoke honestly," I replied. "And you need to keep on doing it. I'm not going to be right every time, and when I'm wrong I'll be relying on you to point it out to me."

I'd known from the beginning that there would be times when Juniper and I rubbed each other the wrong way. And yet there'd been a reason that it was her I'd wanted her as legate for the Fifteenth instead of Nauk or Hakram. It wasn't that she was likely the best officer to come out of the College in our generation, not just that anyway: it was also that she was utterly unafraid of me. She watched her mouth around me because I had a Name and she'd been taught to respect those, not because I intimidated her. It was a dangerous thing for a villain to become used to unquestioning obedience. Juniper nodded again, and her face settled back in that neutral expression I found so hard to read.

"I recall a mention of victory during that lovely little chat you two just had," Masego cut in with a forced smile. "I like victory. We should discuss victory more."

I closed my eyes with a sigh, grateful for the way Apprentice had defused the tension still gripping the scene. So here we were now, I thought, with our backs to the river on a muddy hill and a force twice our size coming our way. Putting aside the cavalry, they had at least our number in Free Cities men-at-arms and at their head was a man with the power of a Name behind him. The Silver Spears meant for this place to be the killing grounds where they would trample over the Fifteenth, break our backs so badly that my ramshackle half-legion would be taken out of the campaign before it had even truly begun.

My eyes might have been closed but I could see the grounds my legionaries were arrayed on as clearly as if they were open, my mind slowly filling in where the mercenaries would come from: the full weight of their infantry in the centre with the cataphracts split between the flanks. The cavalry would pick out my companies of sappers and tear through them like parchment, their own footmen pouring into the gaps and sweeping over my legionaries from all sides. I could imagine the grisly scene playing out so easily, and yet... And yet I could not find it in me to be afraid.

We had half an hour before the enemy was in sight and for some that would make no difference, but the men and women under my command were *Praesi legionaries*. They might have been green, they might never have seen battle before, but at the end of the day

the soldiers under my command carried the legacy of the armies who'd scattered the strength of Callow and carried the Imperial banner all the way to the walls of Laure. And this, this moment and these odds and this feeling of savage glee I could feeling welling up in me as I realized how our back were pressed up against the wall? It was my own inheritance. I'd known from the moment where I'd taken the knife Black had offered me that I was setting out on a path of uphill battles, and now it was finally starting. *Watch closely, teacher of mine. This is where it starts.* Because if those prancing knights with their glorified pigstickers thought they were going to beat my Fifteenth, they had another godsdamned thing coming.

"Ah," Nauk grunted with a distinct undertone of satisfaction. "Looks like we're going to win this one."

"I'm sorry," Masego replied wryly, "I must have missed something. Are we not outnumbered on top a pile a mud with no way of retreating anymore? Because that would be something of a relief, really."

I opened my eyes and ignored both of them, finding that Hakram was still standing at my left looking like a serene green gargoyle. There hadn't been so much as a hint of worry on my Adjutant's face from the moment Robber had come back to report, I suddenly realized. He'd never doubted that I would find a way to turn this around. *When you give your trust you give it in full, don't you?*

"She's doing the face, warlock's get," Nauk continued, "Doesn't matter what they throw at us now – we're going to eat them alive."

Coming from most people I would have taken that as a figure of speech, but with orcs it was always hard to tell.

"I don't do a face," I cut in, mildly offended. "Hakram, tell them I don't do a face."

My Adjutant cleared his throat and refused to meet my eyes.

"You do that thing where you almost smile and you show a little teeth," Juniper told me frankly. "It looks really creepy on a human."

"I bet heroes never get that kind of backtalk from their minions," I muttered. "They probably don't have to raise their own horse from the dead either. Villains get such a raw deal."

I got a handful of smiles out of that and I clenched my fingers before unclenching them, thoughts already flying.

"Juniper," I said. "Get Hune up here. I've got a plan, and we've got no time to waste."

—

Our half an hour of preparation passed much too quickly for my tastes. *It will have to do, regardless.* Besides, my sappers had worked wonders with what little they had on hand: deployed on either side of the hills, they'd covered the muddy grounds in front of them with rows of stakes jutting out with the sharp end first. *And just the right height to slide into a horse's belly.* I was banking everything on the Silver Spears ramming their cavalry into the light sapper companies on my sides instead of the heavies and regulars I'd made my centre out of. Just the stakes wouldn't be enough to stop a cavalry charge, of course, but between them and the crossbows all sappers were equipped with? Even if we didn't stop them cold, we'd bleed them severely. Possibly enough to rout. *Gods Below, let them rout. Because if they don't...* I had another handful of tricks up my sleeves, but having to pull them out that early in the battle would cast the entire plan into doubt. The Forlorn Hope had seemed like another disaster waiting to happen, in a fight that would be this delicate, so I'd taken Juniper's advice and spread their lines across the ranks.

The Silver Spears were milling in the distance, sergeants haranguing their men-at-arms into a semblance of ranks. They'd started trickling in slowly not too long ago, though that trickle had turned into a flood soon enough. Still, there was something vindictively satisfying about their lack of discipline: none of my legionaries would have needed that much screaming to get into a proper line. The mercenaries might be an impressive sight, with their silver armour and forest of pennants, but when it came down to a melee I had no problem believing that my bunch of ugly misfits would run them through. Whoever was in charge of the other side's disposition had decided to run with the classics: two staggered waves of infantry in the middle, with their cavalry split in a roughly even manner between their flanks. Robber's scout had been correct in her suspicions: there were at least nine hundred cataphracts down there.

If they played it well, the sheer amount of people they could throw into the grinder might be able to break my legion through attrition: we'd planned around that as much as we could, but in the end there was only so much Juniper and I could do. Some commanders might be squeamish at the idea of blooding their forces that badly for the win, but that wasn't something I could count on when it came to the Silver Spears: the way they'd been hitting the supply lines of the Empire spoke of a streak of ruthless pragmatism, no matter how heroic they looked. And speaking of heroes, theirs seemed to be galloping ahead of his forces. Did he want a face-to-face meeting before the beginning

of the hostilities? I didn't feel particularly inclined to grant that, all things considered.

It wasn't that I expected any kind of treachery on their part, though I'd be a fool to dismiss the notion entirely, but I knew from my little chats with William that talking with those types was an exercise in frustration. On the other hand, if I was rude enough I might be able to bait this so-called Exiled Prince into attacking recklessly. Something to consider. Said Prince was a pretty boy, I saw as he kept on riding closer. Long, flowing golden hair and a pale disposition that made him look a living marble statue – a little too perfect for my own tastes, but not half-bad to look at. Nothing on Kilian, though. He had a minion riding at his side with what I assumed was the Silver Spears' standard, a pennant with a silver knight riding on a field of white. *You're not even fielding knights, you pretentious jackass*, I thought uncharitably. *Even your standard is full of it*.

"The other one has a Name too," Masego murmured from at my side. "Not a strong one, but still dangerous – probably an attendant-type Role, by the looks of the power. Equerry, maybe, or Page."

I grimaced. That could complicate things. I was confident enough I could take on one Named by myself, but two was a whole other story. Hakram had yet to come into any of his aspects, so besides being a lot harder to kill than most orcs he wouldn't be much help in that regard. Before I could even start of thinking about a way to take them out, though, I was stopped by the simple fact that the two of them *kept on riding closer to my lines*.

"Hakram, sword out and ready the reserve," I barked. "They're up to something."

I pushed myself up, already looking for my horse, but the pair of heroes slowed about two hundred yards away from my battle line and then stopped. Maybe-Page rammed the standard into the mud and brought the horn dangling off his shoulder to his lips, letting out a loud almost crystalline sound. I could feel the shudder that went through my men at the sound of it and the power of my Name flared up angril.

"What the *Hells* was that?" Juniper cursed.

Masego frowned.

"Priestly stuff, I think – your usual "sound will strike fear in the heart of the wicked" package."

"FOUL MINIONS OF THE DARK," the golden-haired hero called out, "I AM THE EXILED PRINCE, LORD OF THE SILVER SPEARS, RIGHTFUL HEIR TO THE THRONE OF HELIKE!"

I blinked.

"Is he... is he starting a monologue?" I asked, just in case I'd somehow been trapped in an illusion.

"Huh," Apprentice mused. "I didn't think people actually did that. I mean, I've read about it, but this is a little surreal."

"I COME TO OFFER YOU THE CHANCE TO END THIS WITHOUT NEEDLESS BLOODSHED. LET THE WITCH THAT COMMANDS YOU STEP FORWARD AND MEET ME IN SINGLE COMBAT!"

"I wish I was a witch," I sighed. "My life would be so much easier if I could set people on fire with my mind."

Juniper shifted uncomfortably to my left, a look of confusion painted on her face for the first time since I'd met her.

"Is he serious?" she asked me. "Why would he risk that when he has the larger force?"

Masego chuckled.

"He's royalty, Legate. It's not a trap – all that crown-wearing has simply atrophied the part of the brain us mere peasants get common sense from," he told her.

Hakram had already prepping the reserve, I could see from the corner of my eye. Good, there was no need to rush into this. The Exiled Prince, apparently content that his challenge had been delivered, was sitting ramrod-straight on his horse and waiting for an answer. Single combat, huh. Someone had been reading too many stories.

"Juniper," I murmured. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but he's about a hundred and fifty yards away from our front?"

The Hellhound squinted, estimating the yards like I had a few moments ago.

"Give or take ten yards," she assessed. "Why?"

"That's effective killing range for our crossbows," I pointed out.

The legate grunted. "And?"

"I was thinking," I said patiently, "about shooting him."

There was a moment of silence and everyone turned to stare at me. What? It was a perfectly reasonable plan.

"Can we... can we actually do that?" Hakram spoke, voice hesitant.

I drummed my fingers against my leg.

"I can't think of a reason we couldn't. He's not here under a flag of truce, and even if he was we have no treaties with the rebels."

"It seems rather unsporting of us," Apprentice drawled, though he sounded more amused than actually opposed to the course of action.

"We don't get points for fair play at the end of the battle, Masego," I replied anyway.

Juniper grunted thoughtfully.

"Would get them moving for sure," she finally said. "Might even make them angry enough to get sloppy with their battle order. Should I send for a sharpshooter?"

"Nauk's close to the front, and he's a fairly good shot," I declined.

Hakram sent one of our messengers down the hill with the order and I watched the soldier make his way through the ranks until he came by the armoured silhouette of Commander Nauk. Even at this distance I could see the surprise in his body language, and when he turned to gaze up in my direction I mimed shooting a crossbow. Nauk shrugged and requisitioned one from a goblin, cranking it and settling the bolt in. There was a heartbeat before it flew, and as the murderous bolt sailed through the air I could already see the angle was wrong – it would hit the Prince's upper chest, not the throat or the head. *And anything short of a killing wound, a hero will shrug off.* The way Hunter had managed to swing around his spear while missing a hand and bleeding out heavily had made that clear enough. At the last moment, though, just before it could hit the hero's chest, some unseen force yanked it up at an awkward angle and it punched into the man's throat. I blinked, struck speechless. In the background Masego started laughing convulsively, and I turned to shoot him a questioning look.

"You managed that with a spell?" I demanded.

If he could do telekinesis at that range, he should have told me – if he could mess about with an arrow, he could definitely choke the guy.

"Wasn't," he got through the fits of laughter, "wasn't me. His armour..."

He finally got the laughter under control, though a shit-eating grin still split his face in two.

"His armour – it's enchanted to turn away arrows. Only it's part of a set, I'd guess, and since he wasn't wearing his helmet..."

Understanding sunk in after a moment. The enchantment had redirected the crossbow bolt away from his chest, and right into his throat. The mercenaries were stirring in the distance like a hornet's nest that had just gotten kicked, but in that moment I couldn't help but burst out laughing.

So much for the Lord of the Silver Spears.

Chapter 18: Tinder

"In most histories of the Uncivil Wars, the Battle of Three Hills is but a footnote – especially given its proximity to the much more contentious Battle of Marchford. But for us, back then? Marchford might have been the crucible that forged us, but Three Hills lit the furnace."

-Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

The laughter did not last long.

The line of men-at-arms fell into chaos at the sight of their leader's death while the probable Page dragged the Prince's corpse back out of range with a cry of dismay. It would be a while yet before their sergeants got them into anything close to marching order, but there were other things to worry about. There was a noise like the beat of a hundred drums as the cataphracts of the Silver Spears charged across the muddy plain, eighteen hundred pairs of hooves striking the ground as they devoured the distance separating them from the Fifteenth Legion. The sight of nine hundred mounted killers decked in silver plate from head to toe was enough to send a shiver down my spine, but I shook the feeling off. The mud was slowing them, though not as much as I'd hoped. A handful of horses slipped under the tricky footing and rolled over their riders, but it was a mere handful. *Not anywhere enough to make a dent in the strength that charge will carry.* The two battalions of four hundred and fifty settled into the rough shape of an arrow as they crossed the ground, headed straight for what they must have thought to be the weak points in my line: the sapper companies on my flanks.

"They'll be in range soon," Juniper grunted.

"Let's hope the stakes will do their job," I agreed quietly.

The first volley of crossbow fire from the goblins did little to hinder the charging horsemen. Not that I'd expected it to, at that range. A few wounded horses, but the other cavalymen streamed smoothly around the downed mounts. *Gods Below and Everburning, what manner of wicked things I wouldn't do to have cavalry like that.* By the time the second volley hit, though, they were well into killing range. The bolts popped through plate on horses and men alike as my legionnaires drew the first real blood of the battle. There wouldn't be time for more than a

handful of those, I admitted to myself with a grimace. Those silver-enamelled bastards were faster than anyone loading a warhorse with that much weight had a right to be. The third volley was the bloodiest yet, and the tip of both mounted battalions disintegrated under the focused fire from my crossbowmen.

"Mages?" I asked the Hellhound.

"Just after the fourth volley," she replied. "We want the best impact."

They cataphracts were fifty yards away from my men when they hit the field of stakes. The ones in front saw the sharp ends jutting from the ground but it was too late to turn back – the momentum from those behind them would carry them through whatever they did. I'd seen some striking things in my life, even before I'd decided to pack up my things and become a villain – there was nothing in Creation quite like a golden Laure sunrise when all the bells in the City of a Thousand Bells were ringing – but I'd never seen anything like those swarms of riders splashing against the stakes like a wave against stone. In a heartbeat they were stopped cold, a line of eviscerated horses and upended riders marking the work of my sappers. That was the moment the fourth volley hit, and if the third one had been bloody this one was sheer slaughter.

"Raise the pennant," Juniper ordered.

A hundred balls of flame bloomed into existence a moment after the signal was raised, and in the wake of the volley our mages sent them raging into the ranks of the enemy. Juniper had argued to concentrate the mage lines on the flanks, while I'd been more inclined to spread them out, and the sight of the chaos they were sowing made me glad I'd taken her advice. Masego clucked his tongue, reluctantly approving.

"Not a bad effect, for such a mundane spell," he conceded.

Being raised by Warlock had given Apprentice a rather elitist view of the kind of magic taught to legion mages. He'd told me once that the fireball spell that was the bread and butter of our mage lines was a "pedestrian construct even a trained monkey could learn", which while probably true was missing the point entirely. Easiness to learn was the criteria for all the official spellwork taught to legionaries: the point of it wasn't sheer firepower, it was to make sure all legion mages could cast the bare basics. During battle, generals could then concentrate those basic spells in a single point to overwhelm the enemy. The doctrine of the Legions of Terror was a thoroughly practical one – it took a lot less time and effort to train twenty legionaries to cast a fireball than to teach one mage to cast one with the

same strength as those twenty combined. Mages with talent like Masego's didn't grow on trees.

In the distance below I could see the fire had been the tipping point for the cataphracts. In the last half-bell, they'd seen their leader die, a third of their number shot by my sappers and now they'd been stopped cold by the Fifteenth's fortifications before being set on fire. They broke, and I felt my lips stretch into a grim smile as they fled back towards their men-at-arms. The first part of our battle plan had gone off without a hitch. Whether that was just the glimmer of hope before we got crushed or the beginning of our way to victory remained to be seen.

The officers on the other side had not spent their time idly: the rest of the Silver Spears was on the move already, the mass of men-at-arms slogging across the muddy field like a great snake made of glittering steel. They were... slower than I expected, and it took me a few moments to figure out why. *The horsemen.* When the cavalry had charged – and then retreated – they'd churned up the ground something fierce. As bad as the footing had been for the mounted men, it was twice as bad for the men-at-arms now. Pushing through knee-deep mud in heavy armour was exhausting work, I knew from personal experience. *They'll be dead on their feet by the time they hit our line.*

Exhausted as they were, the men-at-arms still struck our centre like a battering ram. The formation of Hune's kabili buckled under the impact but stabilized after a moment. As for Nauk's... Well, the centre of his forces was made up of ogres. The moment the enemy vanguard made contact, the hammers came down and the first row of Silver Spears turned into chunky red paste. They kept charging into the meat grinder without flinching, though. The mercenaries were nowhere as disciplined as my own legionaries but I could not deny they were tenacious. I put aside the reluctant admiration I felt for the poor bastards: sooner or later the ogres would tire and the rest of Nauk's soldiers were just regulars and heavies. As long as the enemy kept their focus here, though, we'd stay on top. Every one of their soldiers would have to climb over the corpses of the dead to take a swing at mine, and the sheer mass of their numbers was forcing their front line right into my legionaries' blades. The throng kept pushing forward, stomping over any of their comrades that slipped in the mud – I wouldn't be surprised if a few of them drowned in there, heads kept in the mire by their own allies.

Still, two routs in a row had been too much to hope for. Not that it mattered: the centre was a sideshow, ultimately. If Hune and Nauk broke the battle was over, sure, but the pivot of my plan had always been the flanks. Dug in as they were in the middle of the hills' slope, all my commanders had to do was hold on while we took care of the rest. Juniper had kept a cohort of two hundred up the hill to serve as our reserve just in case there

were any nasty surprises left, ready to plug any gaps in our defence if the worst came to pass.

"What in the Dark Gods?" she barked suddenly.

I followed her gaze and found exactly what she was talking about. Moving through the mass of men-at-arms like ghosts, a handful of enemy soldiers had come to the front of the melee. There couldn't have been more than fifty of them: men and women in strange leathers with their heads shaved, all of them wielding long spears with barbed heads. They moved as a loose arrow and in a matter of moments they wedged themselves right into Nauk's regulars, tearing through the front rank like it was wet parchment. Shit. *Who the Hells are those guys?* Nauk was losing too many legionaries way too quickly, and the counter-charges he ordered failed to dislodge the bastards. The newcomers weren't wearing the same chain mail armour the rest of the men-at-arms, and there was just no way anyone using spears should be that good at killing. Spears were useful as a wall, to press back infantry or break cavalry charges, but these assholes were using them as single combat weapons flawlessly. Juniper looked as stumped as I was, and as usual Masego was pretty much useless when it came to anything that didn't have to do with magic or poor social skills.

"Those are Helike Spear Saints," Hakram said out of the blue.

Everyone turned to look at him with varying degrees of disbelief.

"They're a monastic order from the Free Cities that dedicate their life to the spear," he informed us.

Juniper spat on the ground, whether in disgust at our luck or to show her general opinion of everyone living south of the Waning Woods I couldn't be sure.

"That's all well and good," she grunted, "but what are the fuckers doing here?"

Hakram shrugged.

"The House of Light has ties to the Helike royal family, remember? I guess the hero wasn't full of it when he said he was a prince."

Well, wasn't that nice. Now I had to deal with a unit of shock troops intent on avenging their boss in the middle of a battle where I was already outnumbered badly. What next, was the godsdamned Wizard of the West gonna come out of the grave and set my people on fire?

"How do you even know that?" Masego demanded.

Hakram offered up a truly horrifying sheepish grin. One of these days I was going to have to tell him he actually looked scarier doing that than when he was trying to be scary.

"Figured we might end up fighting in the Free Cities at some point, so I've been looking up foreign units we should be careful around."

And once again, it was made clear why Adjutant was my favourite out of our merry bunch. I really had lucked out, the day I'd been made lieutenant of his line back in the College. I looked back at where the Saints were still tearing through Nauk's men with practiced efficiency. Time to pull out the first of my trump cards, then.

"Apprentice," I said, "clean that mess up."

The dark-skinned teenager offered me a lazy grin.

"Oh? Finally letting me off the leash, are we? Good, I was starting to get bored."

He sauntered off down the hill, and knowing what I knew about the kind of magic he could pull off I felt safe in assuming the situation was now under control.

"You sure that's going to be enough, Squire? Could send in the reserves to be sure," Juniper asked from my side.

"The only other mage I've seen pulling out magic on the same level as Masego is his father," I replied, letting the words sink in.

My senior officers were all aware of who Masego's father – well, one of them anyway – was: Warlock, the Sovereign of the Red Skies himself. If the stories they told about the man in the Wasteland were anything like the ones I'd been raised on, Juniper should understand exactly how dangerous that made Apprentice. With perfect timing thunder boomed and a streak of lightning struck across the noon sky, hitting right in the middle of the Saints. A dozen of them died instantly and twice as many were thrown away like rag dolls by the impact. Their formation wavered, and Nauk's legionaries immediately turned up the pressure. Masego was already chanting his second spell, blue energy crackling around him in threads visible to the naked eye.

"So *that's* why you keep him around," Juniper mused, eyeing Apprentice with more respect than she ever had before.

Captain had been right, I noted with amusement: proficiency at violence really was the quickest way to get on an orc's good side. Hakram cleared his throat from behind us.

"Flanks are seeing action."

My gaze swivelled to the right side of the hills, where my goblins had started to fire on the approaching Silver Spears again. Most of the men-at-arms had been herded into the middle of the battlefield the way I'd intended them to be, but it looked like someone on the other side had kept their head on straight enough that the flanks were still going to have a fight on their hands. It was hard to tell how many of them there were slogging in – at least two hundred, maybe more? There was not even the shadow of a proper formation as they tried to hack their way through the stakes. The tribune in charge had his legionaries focus on the Silver Spears trying to make a path, but they'd brought up large shields to the front to cover themselves. A well-aimed salvo of fireballs put an end to that for a few moments, but before I could count thirty heartbeats they were back at it. I grimaced: the situation was not dire for now, but eventually our mages were going to run out of juice. A glance to the other flank convinced me that was where I should put my attention, though. There were about as many men-at-arms there pushing towards the goblins, but there was a recognizable silhouette at the head of the pack: the maybe-Page from earlier, carrying a banner as he led his soldiers straight into the stakes.

Unlike my officers, I'd never attended the tactics classes at the College. I'd had a very different education on the subject of war: every other day Black would sit down with me and we'd talk for a few hours. On some occasions we'd go over old battles and the ways they'd been won or lost, but most of the time the discussion was a little more abstract. *In every battle there's a fulcrum*, he'd told me, *the point that can swing it one way or another*. Tactics were, generally speaking, better left to the generals: it was the place of those with Names to find that fulcrum and nudge it in the right direction. He hadn't needed to spell out that "nudging" usually consisted of killing the right people in the right place at the right time. The Page raised the pennant he'd been carrying around since earlier and the men-at-arms behind him cheered. They ran straight into the stakes Pickler's sappers had put up and I raised an eyebrow – were they going to hack those down by hand while being shot at the whole time?

At the moment they were losing soldiers with clockwork regularity as my crossbowmen placed their shots with practiced professionalism. They averaged a shot every fifteenth heartbeat, the official requirement for crossbowmen in the Legions of Terror, but I'd noted more than once that they had better accuracy than they should. Hakram had told me Pickler was picky about the kind of wood and rope we got issued, so she probably knew something I didn't. The moment the Page reached the stakes was when it all started going downhill: the Named boy rammed the

standard in the ground and there was a blinding flash of light. I blinked it away and grimaced at what I saw – a rough path had been pulverized through the stakes, the mud still smoking where the Name's power had struck. Soldiers poured into the breach behind him as Page charged up the hill. *And that's my fulcrum right there.*

"Adjutant," I spoke calmly. "We're reinforcing the left flank. Juniper, I'll be taking in the reserve."

One of my mages sent a ball of flame hurtling through the air towards the Page, but a man right behind him raised his hand and the magic flickered out of existence. *So that's the priest that's been mucking up our scrying.*

"I'll take the Page," I told Hakram. "Get rid of the priest before he can make more of a mess."

"At your command," he gravelled back.

Juniper was already barking up a storm in the background, readying the cohort for combat. She wouldn't lead it personally of course – it was her job to stay up here in the place with the best vantage point and make tactical decisions as events unfolded. The two hundred legionaries moved in good order but I pulled ahead, too impatient to wait. Hakram kept up with us as well as he could, but he'd only come into his Name recently. He wasn't as good at drawing on the power to add swiftness to his limbs. By the time I reached the goblins, Page and his men had reached their first ranks. The melee that ensued was sharply in the favour of the Silver Spears: goblins fought more viciously than any other of my soldiers, but none of them stood taller than a human's chest. There were limits to how much nastiness could even out a struggle.

Sure-footed even in the mud, I rammed into the tip of their assault with my sword bare. The man in front of me was tanned and bearded, snarling as I came to him – his blade rose but he was no more than an amateur playing at war. My shield broke his nose and my arming sword cut his throat, leaving a corpse behind as I charged into the melee. The cohort behind me swept into the fight like a hammer blow, knocking the momentum out of the men-at-arms. It had been some time since I'd fought men without a Name, and never before had I taken the fight to them without my own power being hamstrung. The experience was... enlightening. I burrowed into their line like an arrow into flesh, too horrified to smile.

They were not enemies so much as silhouettes now, streaking in front of me almost too fast to follow as I scythed through them like wheat. A young boy tried to bring down a mace on my shield but lost his hand and his head with two flicks of the wrist, crimson raining on the mud as I stepped past his corpse. Stories spoke of villains and heroes as having the strength of a hundred

men on the field, and now I understood the true terror of it: they could not stop me. They could not even slow me, and even when they tried to bury me in corpses they found I did not tire. This was not a fight so much as a massacre, and I felt bile rise in my throat. It was almost a relief when the enemy hero came to meet me, casually running his rapier through the eye of a goblin. Page, the call came through the enemy's ranks. A prayer and a promise. Well, at least I wouldn't have to ask for introductions. Now that I was close enough to see the boy's face I wasn't so sure he was, in fact, a boy. Maybe he just had really delicate bone structure? I suppose I could have asked, but now didn't really seem like the time.

"You," Page spoke and what did you know, that was definitely a woman's voice, "you're the one who ordered that filthy orc to shoot."

I assumed she was referring to Nauk, which was being quite unfair to my commander. He bathed exactly as often as Legion regulations required it, so he wasn't any filthier than the rest of my army.

"More like mimed it, really," I replied.

Page's rapier slid out of the goblin's eye socket with a wet squelch.

"It was nothing more than cold-blooded murder," she said, her tone halfway between anguished and furious. "He was a good man. A *good man*."

"And now he's a dead one," I spoke flatly, eyeing the rapier's point. "Way of the world, or so I'm told."

She was barking up the wrong tree if she was trying to guilt-trip me about the Exiled Prince's death. He'd been asking for a duel, and if you took all the glorified pomp out of that concept all that was left was the intent to kill. *If you're asking me to be sorry that I was smarter about killing him than he was about killing me, you'll be waiting a long time.*

"I should have known better than to expect contrition from a Praesi," Page snarled.

"I'm actually from Callow," I told her, raising an eyebrow.

"- but I promise you this, Squire," she continued, ignoring my interjection, "you *will* be sorry by the time I'm done with you."

I didn't mind letting her trash talk longer than this, though she seemed like she might be done. The longer she talked, the more time Hakram had to take out the priest. The reserve cohort had plugged the gap in the stakes where the men-at-arms had been pouring through and from the corner of my eye I could see the

tribune commanding the crossbowmen putting her lines back in order. That small look at the situation nearly cost me my life: in the fraction of a moment where I'd taken my eyes off of her, Page had moved. Months of sparring against Captain had endowed me with reflexes that bordered on supernatural, though: out of habit I took a half-step to the side, turning a strike that would have gone right through my eye into one that left a thin mark on my cheek. *I guess the conversation's over. Shame, we were finding so much common ground.* The footing was tricky with all the mud but I widened my stance and brought up my shield, the tip of my sword rising to face my opponent.

I'd never faced anyone using a rapier before – it wasn't a popular weapon this far up north – which put me at something of a disadvantage. And if the speed she'd just moved with was any indication, Page might actually be faster than me. *That I can deal with. So were Black and Captain.* I'd just have to stay defensive until I had a better grasp on the way she fought, which was the way I preferred doing things anyway. The other girl was lighter on her feet, unburdened by the weight of the plate I wore, and she slowly circled around me. The point of her rapier flickered a few inches away from my face when I pivoted to match her but I refused to rise to the bait. It was only when she'd done two thirds of a circle around that I realized what she was actually doing: she'd been making her way up the slope to grab the high ground, and I'd been so cautious I'd let her do it without a challenge.

Cursing under my breath I took a few careful steps in her direction, attention divided between her stance and the tip of her sword. I almost missed it when she moved. Her weight shifted a fraction towards her back foot and the instant afterwards she was trying to run her rapier in the soft flesh under my chin – I slapped away at the point with the side of my shield but it was already gone. She immediately took the opening, the rapier sliding into the elbow joint of my sword arm and scoring blood. Hissing, I stepped back and brought my shield up. So that was the way Page wanted to play me, then: feinting with killing blows I couldn't afford to let go and then turning them into quick, debilitating hits to my amour's weak points. *She's fought people in plate before,* I decided. No one our age improvised that well on the spot: she'd already worked out her tactics for this.

Page met my eyes and smiled a cold, cold smile. Huh. I had a feeling I would have liked her, if she weren't currently doing her level best to fillet me. She was good. Better than me, much as it pained me to admit it. I had barely a year of training under my belt, no matter how gruelling it had been, and there was too much of a gap in experience between us for me to be able to beat her at this game. William had hammered in that point in Summerholm, crushing me even at my peak of power. *That's why you don't play the game, you play the player.* The kind of training

she'd gone through wasn't something commoners could afford. She must have studied under masters for years to get this good, learning all the ways to take out different opponents with that little needle of hers. *Those pearly white teeth, that perfectly fitting armour, that immaculate haircut – you're a noble's kid, or at least a wealthy merchant's.* There was something about the way she moved that spoke of a perfectionist streak, and I happened to know how to deal with those.

I rushed her with all the grace of an ogre tearing through a pottery shop, nearly slipping in the mud when I stepped around the blow she flicked towards my eye. She tried to make distance but my Name was howling like an angry beast, thirsting for blood. The power rushed through my veins and I saw her next strike coming before she ever moved, bringing up my shield and letting her point score a thin scratch against the metal. I rammed it into her chest as she was halfway through taking a step back, feeling a savage grin tugging at my lips. At the last moment she managed to turn her stumble into a fluid spin and for the barest of moments we were back to back – I elbowed her, my plate-covered arm ramming into her back with a greatly satisfying noise. She was quicker than I to turn around but I could keep up now, and I'd claimed back the high ground. With a snarl she tried to ram her rapier through the side of my knee joint, but I kicked the point away. I moved forward again, undaunted: I couldn't let her make space again, that was her game. Mine was to stick close where her speed wouldn't mean as much and my arming sword would work best.

The edge of Page's blade shone for a fraction of a moment, glinting like a lake under moonlight before it blurred into motion. I was ready for her this time. My Name was a dark thing, I realized more every day, but it was *my* darkness. I owned it, and I could feel it laugh in time with my every heartbeat. My sword slapped her own away with almost insulting ease. My shield savagely impacted with her face, the telltale crunch of a broken nose resonating up my arm. She flew back, blood flying, and I let go of the shield. Page landed on the ground and tried to get on her knee, rapier providentially still in hand, but my armoured boot landed on her chest and put an end to that. She dropped the rapier and in the blink of an eye slid a dagger I hadn't even noticed into my knee joint – I let out a noise that was half-yell, half-snarl and fell on top of her. We struggled but I was heavier and this was *my* battleground. All those years she'd spent learning all her sword forms and footwork, I'd spent earning stripes of my own. Far before Black had ever taken me under his wing, I'd learned to fight in the damp darkness of the Pit. I had to drop my sword to push down the hand that held the dagger, but my other one was free and that was enough. I punched her in the jaw once, twice and teeth flew.

There was the glint of sunlight on metal and she produced another dagger out of nowhere, trying to slip it into the unprotected stretch after my gauntlet, but it was a shallow wound. I gritted my teeth and worked through the pain as she desperately tried to slide the dagger out of my flesh while I groped through the mud for my sword. She did and I bit down on a scream, but it was a moment too late – my fingers closed on the hilt of my sword and I brought it down right under her chin. There was a wet gurgle and she tried to breathe through it, but I knew a mortal wound when I saw one. With the last of her strength she tried for a final strike, but there was no strength left in her: it just glanced off my breastplate. I leaned forward as the last of light left her eyes, just close enough for a whisper.

“When you see your Prince on the other side,” I gasped, “tell him he should have worn his godsdamned helmet.”

I wrenched my sword free, and that was the end of her.

Chapter 19: Flame

“Maybe I’ll lose one day. But not today, and not to the likes of you.”

– Dread Empress Maleficent the First

I pushed myself up to my feet, wincing as my knee almost gave under my own weight.

My forearm wasn’t as bad, though both wounds would require the attention of a healer before the day was done. At least I wasn’t in any danger of bleeding out even if I wasn’t going to be winning races anytime soon. My armour was a mess of mud and blood, but I was still alive. My first duel to the death with another Named and it couldn’t be called anything but a victory. There was a sweet taste to that truth. *Another milestone passed.* I bent over to pick up my shield, strapping it back on with a grunt and way too much fumbling for comfort. Around me the battle still raged but the Fifteenth was now carrying the day. Juniper’s cohort was driving back the Spears into the opening through the stakes Page had burned, one step at a time. There was a flash of light in the distance and Hakram roared triumphantly. I grinned at the sound and hobbled towards it.

The shield wall my legionaries had formed was advancing steadily, a rampart of steel the furious men-at-arms threw themselves against in vain. There was no formation to the footmen of the Spears. There wouldn’t be, I supposed. That wasn’t what they were meant for: they were just a battering ram used to hold down the enemy while the cataphracts rode them down. Without the silvery horsemen backing them, they’d ended up alone in an uphill melee

against the finest infantry on Calernia – and they were bleeding badly for it. The cohort's frontline split and Adjutant limped back to safety behind it, the opening closing as fluidly as it had come into existence. Hakram looked like he'd been rolling around in a bed full of charcoal and his armour's metal was warped, but aside from that he seemed unwounded. He sketched out the distant cousin of a salute when I got to him, the two of us ending up leaning against each other more to stay up than out of affection.

"Got the Page?" he gravelled.

"Stabbed her in the throat," I agreed.

"Cold," he rasped out approvingly.

"The priest?" I asked.

"Bastard was a terrible fighter, but he did some thing that made him burn to the touch," Adjutant replied.

He brought up his skeletal hand for me to see, the bones of it now blackened and burnt.

"Turns out those don't feel pain," he gravelled. "Choked the man out."

I snorted.

"You know," I mused, "I don't always feel like a villain, but today I might have gotten a little into it."

"Snappy sentence when you stabbed her?" he asked curiously.

"Helmet reference," I explained.

He barked out a laugh. "That's gonna stay a classic, you know," he told me. "I'll bet my good hand there's going to be a song before the month is done."

Gods, there probably would be. Legionaries made songs about bloody everything, it was one of the Legions' oldest traditions. We stood there for a long moment, watching the men-at-arms losing ground. I frowned at the sight eventually.

"We can't drive them away too far," I said. "We need them in position for the second phase."

"They'll follow when we draw back," Adjutant grunted. "It's the other flank I'm worried about. No cohort to hold the line there."

"The godsdamned Hellhound's on it," I smiled. "I'm sure she'll figure something out."

Carefully, we started making our way back to the Fifteenth's unofficial headquarters. Of my senior officers only Aisha and Pickler were still there, and the Senior Sapper was conversing in low tones with several messengers, keeping an eye on the three fronts of the battlefield.

"Lady Squire," my legate grunted. "I see you managed not to get yourself killed."

"I'm touched by your overwhelming faith in my abilities," I replied. "Are you sure you're comfortable gushing this much in public? People will talk."

The grim-faced orc rolled her eyes.

"I sent Apprentice to the right flank," she informed me. "It was beginning to buckle."

A cursory glance was enough to tell me this was no longer the case. The Silver Spears infantry had managed to push through the stakes, though going by the amount of corpses decorating the hill it hadn't been easy. They'd been stopped flat anyway: an entire stretch of the slope had been turned into a hellish wasteland of jagged ice they were failing to pass. Masego was no longer even casting, his panting silhouette standing a little way behind the warped battlefield, but the Spears were fucked regardless. The men-at-arms were slipping all over the already-melting ice, some of them even getting a spike through the guts for the effort. My mage lines were breaking up any large groups of soldiers with fireball volleys while the crossbowmen picked off easy targets one at a time, taking their time to aim.

"That's shooting ourselves in the foot," I frowned. "We need them beyond the ice."

"Lord Masego says he can melt it at will," Aisha informed me. "We're waiting for more forces to trickle to the sides before pulling the trigger."

I hummed, casting my eyes to the centre. With the Spear Saints wiped out, Nauk and Hune had gained back the lost ground. The ogre lines had been pulled back, made to rest so they'd be fresh for the last push, but the Fifteenth's heavies were making an object lesson as to why Praesi heavy infantry had torn through every force set against it since the Reforms. Commander Hune herself had taken the field with her men, swinging around a hammer with a handle large enough to qualify as a tree trunk. Of Nauk I saw no trace, though I'd be surprised if he was in the melee. He knew better than to risk going into the Red Rage when the fight was this close. With the centre line holding so well, the back of the mass of men-at-arms was starting to shift to the flanks. It wasn't well-organized enough to be a command decision, from the looks of it. Soldiers were just looking for somewhere

they could fight instead of waiting for the two dozen ranks in front of them to be done going through the grinder.

"How'd you know they would move to the sides?" I asked Juniper, watching from the corner of my eye as Hakram sent for a healer.

"Armies, like water, take the path of least resistance," she quoted.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Terribilis?"

"One-Eye, actually," the legate said. "You should borrow a manuscript of his essays on tactics – they're a mandatory reading at the College."

I was probably due subjecting myself to that torture, yes. It wasn't that I doubted Marshal Grem would have valuable lessons to teach: Black had outright stated he considered the orc a superior tactician to himself. But orcs writing in Lower Miezán were always a pain to read. Kharsum as a language added suffixes at the end of words to specify gender and numbers, which didn't translate all that well in the common tongue of the Empire. As a result, their sentences were all over the place and occasionally physically painful to read. Before I could duck my way out of the subject, the Hellhound spat on the ground.

"Whoever's in charge on the other side finally got their shit together," she assessed.

I followed her gaze and saw what had prompted the observation: entire companies of men-at-arms were peeling off the back of their centre and wading through the mud towards our flanks. I let out a whistle.

"That's more than we thought," I noted. "With the people they've already got there it should be, what – about five hundred a flank? They're thinning their centre badly."

"It's not a bad call," Juniper grunted. "If Nauk and Hune push downhill they'll be the ones tripping all over corpses and falling in mud. They just need to hold long enough to roll up our flanks and close the jaws on our heavies."

"Arguably this is the best possible outcome, for us," Aisha smiled thinly. "When the shock sets they won't have a hero to keep them in the fight."

Hakram waved over a dark-skinned boy towards me and the mage saluted, stuttering out a greeting before he got to work on my knee. I suppressed a smile. Well, I supposed I'd been somewhat

impressive today. For once I'd actually earned the intimidation factor on my own.

"They'll flee," Juniper growled. "That's the problem. They'll salvage a larger force out of this than I wanted. The cataphracts we were never going to wipe out, but if they cut and run with a thousand infantry and keep what's left of their horsemen they're still a threat when we come for Marchford."

"We can't afford a protracted fight," Aisha reminded her. "We don't have the numbers for it, and if they tire our men out too badly we risk an actual defeat."

"I wish we'd been assigned siege," the Hellhound grunted. "A few scorpions aimed at their centre would be racking up massive casualties right now."

"I already got that from Pickler, thank you," I sighed. "Until we're a fully-manned legion, we won't be given any. Not that we particularly need the engines: Marchford doesn't even have walls, they pulled them down after the Conquest."

"I could make some, if you give me the manpower to cut the trees," Pickler contributed from where she stood.

I blinked.

"We have the nails and rope for that?" I asked.

"Ratface is a man of many talents," the goblin equivocated.

"None of that is in the fucking lists he gave me," Juniper cursed.

I smothered a grin. At this point my quartermaster didn't have an actual reason to not own up to the trades he'd made – he was just pulling the orc's pigtailed because he could.

"We can finish that conversation after the battle," I broke in before the situation could further degenerate.

I felt the flesh on my arm close and thanked the healer, who blushed and scuttled off to take care of Hakram.

"My sappers are ready, by the way," Pickler told us. "You just need to give the word."

The Hellhound grunted and sent a messenger for Masego: he'd be needed for this part. The lot of us were watching the men-at-arms mass out of range of our mages and crossbowmen when the Soninke arrived, slightly out of breath. How he'd managed to lose none of his thickness around the waist while on military rations was beyond me, but campaigning had yet to get him in actual shape.

"This whole battle thing is rather bracing," he told us. "I think I could learn to enjoy it – it's more about shifting the grounds than actually taking lives. Much more interesting of an approach."

Considering he'd likely killed twice as many soldiers as I had today, hearing him say that was a little jarring. Still, I let it go. He'd been raised by a Calamity, that his take on this would be... unusual should be expected.

"You can get the ice from here?" Juniper asked.

"Distance doesn't really matter," he noted. "I just have to stop feeding the constructs – which I'll need to do soon, for the record, if I'm to have enough left in me for the fire trick."

I cast a look at my legate and she nodded.

"Do it," I ordered.

"So assertive," he spoke drily. "If you keep that up I might swoon."

"My skills at seduction are second to none," I agreed, ignoring the sound of Hakram failing to smother a laugh.

The bespectacled mage stared at his handiwork, waving a hand and muttering under his breath.

"And one, two, *three*," he said.

In a single heartbeat, the entire field of ice collapsed into a flood of water. It toppled a few enemy soldiers, though actual casualties had been too much to hope for.

"Huh," I said. "I expected it to shatter, to be honest."

"I used ambient water for building blocs," Apprentice explained. "The power was for the initial shaping, then to keep it cold."

"Right. Can't make something out of nothing," I remembered. "It's one of the original laws."

"Sleeping with a practitioner has done wonders for your education," the mage praised.

I flipped him the finger. He was going to pay for that comment at some point in the future, but for now there were other priorities. Juniper waved at one of her ensigns, the Taghreb putting her lips to a horn and blowing two sharp notes. *Sappers advance*. The sergeants on the other side managed to put a semblance of order into their lines before the entire right flank charged up the sodden grounds. To the left our reserve cohort was withdrawing uphill in good order, the flood of men-at-arms

filling up the space behind them. In some ways that flank was in the most precarious situation: if the enemy soldiers spilled around them, they might get stuck in the crossfire.

"Standard," the Hellhound called out without turning. "Sharpers, full volley."

The orc's voice was calm, her eyes sharp. I'd seen the way my legate could get awkward around people the few times she'd joined my minions for drinks, but on the field was utterly in element. A smile tugged at her lips, showing a hint of fang, and I realized she was enjoying herself. Not the killing itself, I thought, but the battle. Pitting her mind against the enemy's, luring them into the trap she'd set for them. I'd always known that Juniper was a dangerous woman, on an intellectual level, but it had never quite sunk in. She didn't really care *who* she fought, she just cared about the fight. I'd always thought Nauk was the most... orcish of my greenskin officers, but looking at my legate now I knew I'd been wrong. Just because she wasn't using her own sword didn't mean she wasn't in love with war.

Four hundred small balls of clay flew through the air and the detonation that followed was deafening. It was the first time I'd seen real sharpeners deployed in that amount. *So that's why they won the Conquest. How could even knights have stood up to this?* On both sides, the front of the enemy's line disappeared in chunks of metal and gore. I saw the shudder go through the Silver Spears at the sight of all those men just... ceasing to exist, the enemy host recoiling like it was a living thing. On the left flank our cohort broke formation to get away faster, setting up their shield wall again two thirds of the way uphill. There was no equivalent on the right, just sappers and crossbowmen scuttling away before they could get forced into an engagement. A howl of rage and anger erupted from the mercenaries at the sight of them fleeing after such a brutal hit: the mass of men-at-arms charged in their direction, eager for blood.

"They're coming too quickly," I said.

"Fucking amateurs," Juniper spat. "Their left is still hesitating. They're not even coordinating the assaults."

The right was too far ahead. I closed my eyes. Could we pull off half the reserve cohort to serve as a stopgap? No, one hundred men wouldn't be enough. Not with what the enemy was sending up, not even if they made it in time. Thinning our centre was just trading one danger for another. If they punched through Nauk and Hune we were done for.

"Fuck," I spoke in a low voice. "Juniper?"

"Out of options, Foundling," she admitted. "And we can't afford to let them connect. If they manage to scatter our right, the battle is over."

"We'll get some on the left," Aisha murmured. "Just not as many as we'd hoped."

"Do it, Apprentice," the Hellhound commanded after hesitating for a moment.

"I don't take orders from you, legate," the Soninke replied flatly.

"Do it, Masego," I ordered.

He sighed. "You could have said please, at least," he complained.

The bespectacled mage squared his shoulders, took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Though I hunger I am never sated," he chanted in Mthethwa. "Through grass and ground I crawl, devouring all I behold. My blood knows the call, my flesh the craving. Nameless eidolons, thieves of Heaven's grace, *grant me flame.*"

He snapped his fingers, and so his prayer was granted. Two small threads of flame grew out of the sound, growing in length and thickness as they coiled up his arm. The twin heads of snakes rose behind his back, flickering tongues of heat and smoke.

"I *command* you," he hissed with a visible effort.

He raised his hand and the spellfire spread, the snakes growing in size until their heads were the size of a horse – and then shot forward through the sky in both directions. I watched in awe as they devoured what must have been half a mile each, arcing up until they reached their apex. And then dropped, hitting the ground in the spots we'd showed Apprentice. There was a heartbeat of utter silence across the battlefield and then the chain of goblinfire caches we'd buried in the hills exploded, drowning the flanks in green. Under my troubled eyes, six hundred men went up in flames before I could so much as let out a breath. The screaming began and I had, unless I was mistaken, just won my first battle

Gods forgive me.

Chapter 20: Ashes

*"We fought,
across field and river,
carrying the Tower's writ
to the foot of the Wall.*

*We fought
and did not grow old."*

– Spoken Kharsum verse attributed to Sharok the Blinded,
chieftain of the Iron Bears (banned by Imperial decree)

I'd killed people before.

Occasionally I'd even enjoyed it. Some had died by my own hand, others by the consequences of my actions – or inaction. In a way one could even say that every death in the Liesse Rebellion was on my head. That particular truth had cost me a few sleepless nights, though as time passed the pangs of self-loathing came less and less often. I'd known guilt about bloodying my hands, though, that was the heart of it. And yet as I searched myself for that feeling, watching at over half a thousand men going up in flames, I found nothing. No, that wasn't right. Not nothing, just... little. *Gods, that might actually be worse.* No tears need be shed for the likes of the Silver Spears, I told myself. They were Free Cities mercenaries playing hero in a Callowan war while on the take from the First Prince. The very kind of foreign soldiers who'd made Callow the battlefield for their "glorious" wars against Evil over the centuries, dying ugly deaths in the Wasteland and leaving my people to deal with the fallout of their failed crusades. There was a satisfaction to be found in evening that balance, I couldn't deny.

After all, shutting the door on the fingers of foreign armies was one of the oldest Callowan traditions – one forged breaking the Legions against the walls of Summerholm and sharpened drowning the Vales in Proceran blood. *That's the comparison I'd like to make, but the truth is a little different isn't it?* I wasn't Elizabeth Alban bringing down Regalia's flying fortress or Jehan the Wise marching on Salia to hang seven princes and one: my paymaster was the Tyrant in the Tower, my teacher the very man who'd annexed the Kingdom by force of arms. My soldiers were not only Callowans but also Taghreb and Soninke, orcs and ogres and goblins. There'd been a time when seeing anything but humans west of Summerholm was a rarity, but those days were done and over with. Creation wasn't any larger than it had been in the days of the old heroes, but it was more *connected*. Walls had been brought down by the Conquest that no one could build back up, lines blurred between friend and foe. For better or worse, I was the heiress to that legacy. To that terrifyingly rational breed of Evil that was not above imitating Good when it served its purposes.

It was a bastardly, calculating kind of philosophy – but then Juniper and I had just planned to burn six hundred men alive and shared displeasure at the number not being higher. *I'm more bastardly than calculating, but I suppose the Hellhound can hold up the other side of that pot.* I watched calmly as the forces

pressing on the Fifteenth's flanks melted like snow under spring sun, the crackle of green flames drowned out by a chorus of screams. My own soldiers weren't in any immediate danger of being swallowed by the fire, though we'd have to evacuate the hills before a bell passed. Goblinfire could use anything as fuel, but it spread faster across certain types of ground. Sappers going through the College were taught a chart of observed spreads so they could make the calculations as Pickler had: allegedly wet mud was close to the bottom. Masego had noted the ratios on the chart displayed magically significant numbers, the implications of which escaped me at the moment. Nobody but a handful of goblin tribes knew how to make the eponymous fire, though, so I'd be sure to question him on the subject later.

I was starting to earn my reputation for using the stuff, so I might as well learn what I could about it.

With the flanks covered it was time to break the mercenaries for good. I supposed I could have gone back to the frontlines, but at this point there was no real need. The exhaustion was already beginning to set in, anyway, and getting the Fifteenth too used to relying on me to soften up the enemy wasn't a great idea. They had to be able to operate independently of me: that was rather the whole point of having a legion to call my own. Juniper called for the horns to be sounded again and three deep, long bellows echoed across the battlefield. Beneath me the companies of the centre formed into a large wedge as the ogre lines moved back to the front to make the tip of the spear. The legionaries stepped forward, ramming themselves into the men-at-arms, and for a moment it looked like even after the horrors of the day the mercenaries would hold.

Nauk's armoured ogres put an end to that illusion, brutally hammering their way through the core of the enemy formation and splitting it in half. Juniper grinned fiercely at the sight of it, knowing the battle was as good as done. Within moments the enemy soldiers around the edges panicked, the safety of having their comrades covering their sides ripped away from them. A few ran, and that was the finger to the scale: the panic spread across the ranks and the army collapsed. Some knots of stronger-willed enemy soldiers tried to stem the flood but my officers were War College graduates and knew full well how to handle an enemy rout – companies surrounded and overwhelmed the last remnants of resistance where they stood, allowing the runners to leave the field.

"Well," Hakram said. "That's that."

"I did not think your goblinfire trick would be this effective," Masego panted.

"It performed below predictions," Juniper grunted.

She was very much trying to look like she wasn't jubilant, but the look in her eyes betrayed her even if her face remained grim. Aisha, on the other hand, was not so reserved.

"*Bin hamar*," she cursed in Taghrebi. "Two to one, our backs to the river without a speck of horse and we still *fucked* them. And not even gently. This was rough stuff all around."

"Colourfully put," Apprentice replied, grinning in a way that showed off his perfect teeth.

"We're not done yet," I said. "We need to take prisoners where it's feasible, heal our own and get the Hells off these hills before we join them on the pyre. And you can be sure that we'll find the survivors holed up in Marchford."

"Foundling is right," the Hellhound said, sounding a little perturbed by the act of speaking those words. "Hard part is over, but that just means the drudgework is beginning."

"Merciless Gods, the two of you need to have a drink," Aisha retorted. "The Tower sent a joke of a half-legion against a numerically superior band of *hardened mounted killers* and we put them over our knee for a good spanking. Take a moment to fucking enjoy it, at least!"

Huh, first time I'd ever heard her curse in Lower Miezán. Aisha wasn't stuck up – formal, they insisted on calling it – like some of the noble children I'd come across, but she did make a point of following most rules of etiquette. *Better breeding demands better manners*, the proverb went in Callow. Or it did in the pretty parts of the city, anyway. Dockside, the saying had been a little different: *inbreeding demands pompousness*.

"Fine," Juniper grunted, pausing for exactly three heartbeats. "There, I enjoyed it. We're done. Now get me my casualty reports, Staff Tribune."

I smothered a smile. I supposed I could find some comfort in the Hellhound forever having the general demeanour of an angry bear.

"Senior Sapper," I called out to Pickler. "How's the fire spread looking?"

The diminutive goblin grimaced. "Faster than we fought. Might have to dig a few trenches to buy us time."

I took off my helmet and passed a hand through my sweat-drenched hair.

"Draft outside the sappers for that," I ordered. "I'll want goblin eyes out and about when night falls. Having them falling asleep would be counterproductive."

"I'll talk to Commander Hune," she nodded, offering me a salute before haring off.

"Nauk's kabili will have been mauled," Adjutant spoke calmly from my side.

"He was already understrength," I winced.

Nominally a kabili was supposed to count a thousand fighting men, the quarter of a regular legion, but most of the Callowan deserters had come from the large orc's numbers. He'd been at about seven hundred when we gave battle, and since then he'd had to weather both the Proceran men-at-arms and their monkling spearmen.

"Our sappers and crossbowmen got off light," Hakram noted. "The reserve too. We should still have over a thousand legionaries in shape to fight for Marchford."

"And in that thousand we'll have two goblin cohorts, Adjutant," I sighed. "That's four hundred soldiers I can't put in the shield wall."

"We'll manage," he gravelled. "We always do."

We stayed quiet for a long time as I watched my legion secure the field. The enemy had fled mostly into the woods, but the Fifteenth had been ordered not to pursue. Our scouts would find the largest groups in the coming days and we'd take them apart piece by piece before marching on the city – defeat in detail, they called it in the College. Allowing them to bunch up again would be dangerous, even if we'd decapitated their leadership. Legionaries walked across the grounds in lines, finishing off enemy wounded and occasionally taking officers prisoners. They'd be furthest down the line for healing, but if possible we'd keep them alive: anything we could learn about the remaining Spears might come in useful. And if I could get actual proof that they were being paid by Procer... No, that might be too much to hope for. I doubted the First Prince would be sloppy enough to have the funds traceable back to her.

Leaving Hakram behind, I went downhill to survey the work of my legion up close. The stench of shit and blood was nauseating, even with the battle only just ended. Here and there I noticed limbs and bits of corpses missing – orc work, that. Their practice of feeding on the dead was looked down by even most Praesi, but it was tacitly allowed by the Legions so long as it remained limited to enemy corpses. The cannibalism was one of the reasons Praesi armies moved quicker on the march than most other armies on the continent: the supply train could be much lighter if after every battle half your army could make a meal of the enemy. Goblins occasionally took trophies – almost always eyes or ears, more rarely finger bones – but they didn't actually eat

them. Their diet was close to a human's, where orcs ate almost only meat and might actually take sick if they were kept on bread rations for too long.

The sight of the hills from down where I stood was eerie. The curtains of smoke rising into the sky framed the sight of the Fifteenth carrying its supplies out of the way, oxen and men organized in careful routes under the vigilant eyes of their officers. On the field itself the healers were setting up shop in knots, triaging my wounded and carefully gauging how much power they could expend before being too exhausted to be of any use. Praesi medicine was far above the Callowan equivalent, and not just because mages were born in the Wasteland much more frequently than they'd been in the Kingdom. They'd inherited many old secrets from the Miezens, with their only superiors on Calernia being the Ashurans – whose own mage-doctors were highly sought after even across the Tyrian Sea. I found my feet taking me to the edge of the battlefield, where the corpse-stench was not as strong and I could stand where the Silver Spears once had.

I wasn't quite sure what I'd come to find down here. Not absolution, of that much I was sure. Regret was the first step on that path, and I didn't regret anything I'd done today. I'd been brutal but war was a brutal thing: flinching away from inflicting death to your enemies was to have your own soldiers pay the price for your squeamishness. We might have lost, had I not condemned those six hundred men to a painful death, and that was an unacceptable outcome. I'd come too far, compromised too much of who I was to allow the likes of the fucking Silver Spears to undo all of it. Maybe, I thought, it was just for the first time since I'd taken the knife Black offered me I actually felt like a villain. Like the monster of the story. And with that came understanding that had eluded me as a child.

The villains in the stories always had a trigger, a first spark to set the blaze. They'd been wronged, laughed at. They had a grudge to settle against Creation, and they were going to do it by toppling all those righteous kingdoms like a house of cards. They flew the banners of empires they'd crafted out of cold rage and egomania, sent their Legions of Terror to conquer everything from the sacred forests of the Golden Bloom to the burnt wastelands of the Lesser Hells. It didn't matter what they took, I was beginning to grasp, so much as the fact that they took it. What did the Tyrants care if the heroes freed their monsters or destroyed their ancient magical weapon, if they brought down the Dark Tower on their head or sunk the ancient city they'd raised from the depths? At the end of it all, even if you lost you'd already won. I finally got it, then. You'd won because in a hundred years someone was going to look at the ruins of your madness and their blood was going to run cold. Like a child screaming at the night, you filled the silence so that someone would hear.

Maybe I had a touch of that madness in me too, because I looked at the field of corpses in front of me and I could see a fate written across the mud and the blood and the eerie green fire. The banner of the Fifteenth flew high, a streak of darkness defying the noonday sun, and my legionaries swarmed like ants over the wounded to silence their cries. Maybe I'd been born a little twisted and that was what Black had seen in me, back in the streets of Laure, because there was a feeling welling inside me that was like a laugh bubbling up my throat. I'd won today, won against odds a seventeen-year-old girl with barely a year of military training had no business beating. And yet here I was alive, more gloriously alive than I'd ever felt in my life. I could see the path ahead of me, the same I'd whispered of to Hakram: *whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.*

My Name bared its fangs in approval.

I shivered, wishing I'd thought of putting on my cloak, and returned to my legion.

—

"Three hundred dead," Juniper growled. "Twice that in wounded."

I took a long pull from the water skin, raising an eyebrow at the taste. I snuck a look at Hakram, who tried for innocent but came out looking more like an ugly green cat whose fangs were still full of feathers. Well, if he wanted to add aragh to the stuff I wouldn't complain.

"How many of those will make it?" I asked.

The Hellhound glanced at Aisha, who grimaced.

"Hard to say. Mages have steadied some of our worst cases, but they had to prioritize. If I have to give you my best estimate, I'd say that by tomorrow the casualties will have gone up to around five hundred. Taking in the cripples and those who won't be able to fight for a few fortnights, we should have about one thousand in fighting shape for Summerholm."

Adjutant did not smile, which made his smugness even more obvious. I rolled my eyes, then frowned as a realization came.

"Shouldn't Kilian be here to report on the healers?" I asked.

Aisha cleared her throat uncomfortably.

"She's unconscious at the moment."

My stomach dropped. "She's wounded?"

"Drew too deep," the Staff Tribune replied with a shake of the head. "Apparently she almost manifested wings this time."

I swore under my breath. "She's not in any actual danger, is she?"

"It's happened once before, during war games against Morok," Hakram gravelled. "She was fine after two days of rest."

I was asking Masego to take a look at her regardless, I decided. Healing was far from Apprentice's specialty, but he'd forgotten more about that kind of magic than most legion mages ever learned. From the corner of my eye I caught sight of Hune and Nauk striding in our direction. The orc commander said something and the large ogre shook with laughter, patting the top of his head fondly with her pan-sized hands. A tribune stepped up to Nauk and after saying something Hune sped off towards us.

"Legate Juniper, Lady Squire," she greeted in that surprisingly delicate voice of hers. "You've won a great victory today."

"We," I corrected. "None of this would have been possible if you hadn't held the—"

A bloodcurdling scream interrupted me. My eyes swivelled in the direction it had come from just in time to see Nauk's open hand impact with his tribune's mouth, sending teeth flying and the man himself sprawling into the mud. Painful convulsions wracked the orc's body as his eyes clouded red. Half a dozen legionaries raised their shields and went to form a circle around him but I waved them away, striding towards the out-of-control officer.

"Nauk," I barked. "Snap out of it."

There was no trace of the orc I knew on that creature's face. Just bottomless rage, and with a feral howl he lunged at me.

"The hard way, then," I said.

It'd been a while since I'd gotten to fight someone without swords being involved and my officer was larger than any man or woman I'd ever fought in the Pit. Still, the principles remained the same – and my grip was a lot stronger than it used to be. I stepped aside and let the momentum of his charge carry him past me, turning to face him as he slid in the mud and roared. The next time he went for my throat, I was ready for him: I steadied my footing and caught his wrist, flipping him over my shoulder and down into the ground. He'd done most of the lifting for me, charging recklessly like that. He clawed at my legs but found no give in the steel – I sat on his back and pressed down his wrist, struggling to keep it under control. Even at this awkward angle he was ridiculously strong, more than I'd ever seen him be when he wasn't under the Red Rage. I eventually managed to catch the

other hand and forced it down with the first. He struggled while screaming at the top of his lungs, but his feet couldn't reach me and all he managed was to smother his armour and face in mud.

Eventually his movements slowed, then stopped. His breath was even and he hadn't roared in a while, though his chest still convulsed softly. I leaned forward to take a look at him: the orc's eyes were still red, but for a different reason. He was quietly weeping into the mud. During the fight Hune had stalked back to us and she carefully picked up the battered tribune before setting him on his feet. I frowned and gestured for him to come closer – he did, after casting a wary look at Nauk.

"What did you tell him?" I questioned.

"Casualty report, ma'am," he managed through his missing teeth.

I closed my eyes and let out a long breath. "Nilin?"

The man nodded and I slid off of the greenskin commander's back.

"Come on, Nauk," I murmured. "Up we go."

With a grunt I hoisted him back to his feet. The large orc mumbled an apology, tone shamed, but I ignored it. There was nothing shameful about grieving a dead friend, and the two of them had been close as brothers.

"Go see Apprentice," I ordered the tribune. "Get yourself healed."

I sat Nauk down on a mostly dry log, ordered for a pair of legionaries to stay with him and gestured for Hakram to come to me.

"Find his corpse," I ordered.

He nodded. "And then?"

I looked up to the sky, no longer finding it so promising. The victory had taken a bitter taste, and even bitterer was the knowledge this wasn't the last time I'd lose a friend to the battlefield. Nilin, though, Nilin was the first. There was something special about that, a deeper loss. Maybe it was because he'd been a kind boy, almost too kind to be a soldier. *And only a fortnight ago we were sharing a fire and bottle, joking about gravestones.*

"Get the Prince and the Page," I said. "Put the bodies on his pyre. If Nilin's leaving us, then he'll get an exit to be remembered."

I paused, eyes turning cold.

"And Hakram?"

He turned.

"Tell Juniper to ready the goblin companies for pursuit in the dark," I spoke through gritted teeth. "I am no longer interested in taking prisoners."

Chapter 21: Marchford

"The best revenge isn't living well, it's living to crucify all your enemies."

– Dread Emperor Malevolent III, the Pithy

Nilin looked younger without his armour on.

With his eyes closed he might have looked like he was sleeping, if not for the gaping wound across his stomach. I hadn't had to order him cleaned or his insides put back inside, and for that I'd be grateful to Hakram until the day I died. Orcs took death differently than humans, he'd told me. They preferred avenging to mourning, one of the many reasons the Steppes were such a spinning wheel of blood feuds whenever the Empire wasn't at war. Open displays of emotion were seen as a shameful act dishonouring the dead. Nauk's reaction to the death of a boy he'd been close as a brother to was strange by the standards of his people, and Juniper eyed him with silent disdain whenever she thought no one was looking at her. Witnessing that sent a flare of rage through my veins every time, but I'd held my tongue: I could not expect to command a host hailing from five different cultures without occasionally encountering ways I found repulsive.

Soninke and Taghreb funerary customs were alien to me, influenced by centuries upon centuries of rubbing elbows with necromancers. In Praes men and women could sign away rights to their bodies for gold, selling their dead flesh as materials the corpse-raisers would use in their work. An abomination, by the standards I'd been raised to. Of all the traditions of the Wasteland none was so despised by Good nations as necromancy. The hatred had been kept fresh in Callow by the multiple undead plagues unleashed on the kingdom by past Warlocks, while in Procer the Lycaonese had been warring with the Kingdom of the Dead since before the foundation of the Principate. Signing away your corpse was against regulations, however, and so Nilin was to burn. The Soninke preferred to bury their dead in large labyrinth-mausoleums of baked mud, but out here on the field legionaries got a Legion burial: fire and the promise of more death to come.

Lumber had been cut from the woods flanking both sides of the road for most pyres, but for this one things had been arranged differently. Dead cataphracts were piled up in a makeshift pyramid, with the two corpses Nilin rested on recognizable even

from where I stood: the Exiled Prince and his Page, both still in full armour. As the highest ranking officer present the right of lighting the pyre went to me, but doing so would have felt... wrong. Nauk was the one to dip the torch in the still-burning goblinfire and toss it onto the stacks. Green flames spread over the flesh and metal with unseemly haste. Kilian had hobbled her way to the funeral against her healer's advice, leaning heavily against my shoulder as she clasped her hand in mine. The redhead was paler than I'd ever seen her, exhausted and still shaking with the odd tremor. She stood by my side as night fell and our friend's corpse turned to ashes.

"We were taken into Rat Company at the same time, you know," Kilian eventually said. "Back then Nauk scared me – always loud, always looking for a fight – but Nilin and I always got along. We bought books at the same shop in Ater, traded them when we were done."

She smiled sadly.

"I suppose I'll have to find someone else to talk history with."

Grief looked pretty on her but then I suppose most things did. I squeezed her hand, because what could I possibly say? Juniper was the first to leave. Hakram followed not long after, heading out to see my will done. Every single member of the former Rat Company who'd made it into the Fifteenth passed by at some point in the burning, many stopping by the flames to whisper something into the crackle.

"What are they saying?" I asked Kilian quietly.

"They're giving Nilin a secret or a promise," she replied. "Something to bargain with on the other side."

It was such a deeply Praesi thing to do, I reflected, and for once the thought was fond. I kissed the side of my lover's neck, letting go of her hand and found myself walking up to the pyre.

"I've never done this before," I told Nilin, by now little more than blackened bones wreathed in green. "The priests from the House of Light handle the funerals, back home. Consecrate the graves and shepherd souls on their way to the Heavens."

I already knew what I wanted to say, but spitting it out was proving more difficult than I'd thought.

"I'm sorry," I finally whispered. "You were my friend, one of the first, and this cost you. But if I had to make the choice again, knowing it would end like this, I still would. I could say that we'll win, that I'll make your death meaningful, but how will that help you? They're empty words anyway. We both know I would have done all I can to win regardless."

I wondered if all the offerings he'd been given had been so bitter or if it was just my own. Shame was not a feeling I'd felt in a while, not since I'd come to Ater, but I recognized the sting of it then and there.

"Here's something you can use, at least," I spoke quietly. "I let him go, the Lone Swordsman. I'm the one who started all of this."

Maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought that for a moment the nearest flames to me flared up. *Until we see each other next, Nilin.* I trudged back to Kilian and we stood there until the moon reached its apex, silently taking comfort in each other's presence. Nauk was still standing by the fire when we left, silent face lined with grief.

I did not meet his eyes.

—

Before my teacher had conquered Callow, Marchford had been defended by walls.

I could still see the marks where they'd stood as I rode into the city: the sappers who'd brought them down hadn't bothered to remove the foundations. The Countess had fought with the royal army and so her demesne had been stripped of its defences and of some of its privileges – she'd barely been allowed to keep enough men to keep bandits out of her lands – but the city itself had remained in the hands of the House of Talbot. It had been the Tower's policy after the Conquest to keep the number of Imperial governorships to a minimum, so that the transition would be smoother. The Countess' contributions in the defence of Summerholm had ranked her city a Legion garrison, though, later slaughtered in the opening move of the rebellion. *And now she's said to be engaged to the Duke of Liesse, our would-be-king.* That a fucking exile who'd bailed without ever facing the Legions on the field claimed to have a right to the throne of Callow rankled me. Especially since he'd lived out the decades since in comfortable exile across the Vales.

Six days had passed since what the men now called the Battle of Three Hills, and our advance on Marchford had gone suspiciously smoothly. My goblin companies had been hunting the remaining Silver Spears in the dark every night, but they found fewer of them every time. Interrogation of the prisoners we'd taken at the battle had yielded that the commander of the men-at-arms had apparently survived the massacre, meaning the mercenaries still had someone to rally around. While I doubted the Spears would give us battle again, now that they'd lost their main leaders and been given such a sharp lesson by the Fifteenth, I did not want them escaping to join the main rebel army. If they fled back to Mercantis to lick their wounds I'd make my peace with it, but having to face the bastards on the field in a few months was out

of the question. Juniper had predicted they'd retreat to Marchford and choose their way from there, but as I led a company through the deserted streets of the city it became clear she'd been wrong.

There were no soldiers here, and you'd think there were barely any people at all. According to the Imperial census Marchford had a population of ten thousand, though many of the residents only lived there temporarily. Many of the inhabitants were miners from the silver mines in the hills, whose families moved with them to the mining sites when a fresh vein was found and only returned to the city when they were out of work. The county itself was rich, and it showed in the way the city had been built. Stone was more common than wood and the layout of the avenues had been planned, unlike the maze of dead-ends and cramped alleys that was Laure. To the south I could see the wide grounds of Marchford Manor, and even to my Name-sight they were deserted. There were still people in the city, but they'd fled at the sight of the Fifteenth and barricaded themselves inside their homes. I lingered at the crossing of an avenue, considering my options.

"Lady Squire?"

I glanced at Captain Ubaid, the young man in charge of the company escorting me. One of Commander Hune's men, who'd apparently distinguished himself at Three Hills by killing three men-at-arms and dragging one of his wounded back behind our lines. He had sharp eyes and Hakram had remembered his marks at the College being above average, if not exceptional. He looked about as wary as I felt, casting cautious looks at the empty streets. *If I wanted to set an ambush for an enemy commander, I'd wait until they were too deep in the city to turn back.* Or was I being overly cautious? The locals seemed terrified of us, and there'd been no resistance at all as we advanced.

"Send a runner back to Legate Juniper," I ordered. "We'll be pressing on to the manor without waiting on her. She's to garrison the city and proclaim martial law."

"Ma'am," he hesitated. "That seems... ill-advised. We're surrounded by thousands."

"We're surrounded by scared civilians, captain," I grunted. "Look at them – they don't have the stomach for a fight. I'd wager the Countess took all the men of soldiering age with her when she left for Vale."

"As you say, Lady Squire," he deferred.

A legionary peeled off from the company to carry my message. I noted with a mix of approval and amusement that Ubaid tightened the formation as we headed south, positioning the men so that they could form a *testudo* in moments. *Good. Just because they*

have a villain with them doesn't mean they're safe. Callow's taught the Legions that lesson again and again, over the years. The path to the manor was bare of fortifications, and not because of any edict of my teacher's. The hills surrounding Marchford were a natural defence that had served the city for centuries, impassable to armies save for a few goat paths the locals kept knowledge of to themselves. Back when Callow was a mess of petty kingdoms, the rulers of Marchford had fought most their battles at the ford the city was named for, only rarely facing siege in their seat of power – as a result they'd put their wealth into men and swords instead of the kind of walls Summerholm boasted. The paved road brought us to a pretty hilled garden dotted by lovely pavilions, where fountains of white chalkstone gurgled merrily. Granite statues of stone knights guarded the last stretch to the manor gates, still smiles splitting their bearded faces.

"Lovely place," Captain Ubaid spoke drily. "Lucky they poured all that silver into the fountains instead of soldiers, or we'd have a fight on our hands."

"Would that we did," I replied. "That'd mean less men with Liesse."

The stables were empty and looked like they'd been for quite some time. For appearance's sake I left Zombie in one of the stalls, though I could have left him standing in a flower bed for all the difference it made. It wasn't like he was going to wander. Marchford Manor itself was quite large, all beige limestone and wide glass windows. Not coloured stuff, though, so unlikely to be imported from Procer. Wide oaken doors opened without trouble when a pair of my legionaries pushed, revealing a half-dozen people in livery. Ah, finally someone to talk to. The maids I dismissed immediately as irrelevant, but one man with a closely-cropped beard wore a steward's uniform. I entered the manor flanked by Captain Ubaid and one of his lieutenants, both of them sword in hand. The sight of the bare steel had the locals flinch in fear.

"I'm Catherine Foundling," I announced flatly. "You may know me as the Squire. Who's in charge here, exactly?"

The bearded man swallowed loudly but stepped forward and bowed.

"I'm Fourth Steward Greens, my lady," he replied. "Responsible for the manor. And the city, I suppose."

Fourth Steward. I frowned and struggled to remember the orphanage etiquette lessons I'd breezed through. He wasn't in charge of the stables, that would be the third, so –

"Latrines," I spoke amusedly. "You're the sanitation man."

"That would be me, your ladyship," he agreed nervously.

My lips twitched.

"Do you have the authority to surrender the city to me, Fourth Steward?" I asked.

"I do," he replied. "I think. But whether the people will observe that surrender is beyond my means to ensure."

Heavy patrols, then. I didn't intend to order the massacre of fellow Callowans but public order would have to be maintained. I resisted the urge to grimace. *Scared people can do stupid things, and we've got them too scared for my tastes.*

"Then kneel, Greens," I ordered. "As of this moment, Marchford is returned to the Imperial fold."

He did, and just like that I'd won a city.

—

Countess Elizabeth's solar was almost decadently comfortable. It had been stripped of all the more obvious signs of wealth and what I assumed to be the most expensive paintings were missing, but even after that it was one of the most luxurious rooms I'd ever held council in.

"The city's been stripped bare of men and food," Ratface told the senior officers. "They barely have enough to feed themselves."

"I'll double the watch on our supplies, then," Nauk growled. "Nip any notions of looting in the bud."

I sipped at my cup of Vale summer wine, resting against the back of my cushioned seat as I studied him. He seemed steadier now, but there was something angry to the orc that hadn't been there before. As if Nilin's death had stripped him of the last check on his recklessness. Still, now was not the time or place to speak to him about it.

"Still no sign of the Silver Spears?" I asked Commander Hune instead.

"We've interrogated some of the locals," the ogre replied softly. "Some passed through, including what remains of the cataphracts, but they're all gone – into the hills, I'm told. Less than eight hundred in total."

"We can't pursue in there with the Fifteenth," Juniper stated. "Goblins might manage the paths but I'm reluctant to commit scout companies without backup."

She was right, much as I disliked admitting it.

"We'll table that for the moment," I said. "Hakram, how's the city?"

The Adjutant hummed. "Quiet, for now. But they're afraid we'll put everyone to the sword to hurt the Countess."

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh. Would they even have considered that, before Heiress had set half of the duchy of Liesse on fire? Hard to tell, but I was ever inclined to blame the other villain for the messes I found myself in.

"I want Legion regulations observed to the letter," I spoke flatly. "If there's any scuffles with the citizens, come down harshly on everyone involved."

I got a chorus of acknowledgements in response. Pickler cleared her throat afterwards and I raised an eyebrow.

"If we're going to be staying here for a few days, I'd like sanction to build siege engines," she said.

I cast a look at Juniper. The grim-faced orc frowned.

"Dragging a trebuchet around would slow us on the march," my legate finally said.

"I'll keep it light," the Senior Sapper replied. "A few scorpions, maybe one of the smaller ballista models. Think of what you could do with those, when we finally tangle with the Liesse host."

The Hellhound glanced at me and I shrugged.

"Sanction given," she gravelled. "You can have the sappers and a company of regulars to gather the wood."

I was about to redirect the subject to patrol schedules when Masego interrupted. I started – he wasn't even sitting at the same table as us, having claimed a smaller one near the windows overlooking the hills to the south.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention," he exclaimed, peering into a scrying bowl. "First, I can confirm that it was the priest our own Deadhand killed that was blocking my scrying. Second, I appear to have found what remains of the Silver Spears' leadership."

He rose to his feet, carefully bringing over the bowl to us without troubling the surface. I leaned over the table and saw three men, two of them in horseman's plate, arguing near what seemed to be the bottom of a hill.

"*We need to go deeper, to-*" one of them started but the sound went silent.

"Apprentice?" I prompted.

He blinked. "That shouldn't be happening."

A heartbeat later the silhouette of the Silver Spears disappeared, the water rippling without cause.

"That *definitely* shouldn't be happening," Masego said, confusion and irritation warring for dominion over his tone.

The water stilled momentarily and sight returned to us, but it was no longer the Silver Spears we saw: a pair of pale green eyes were staring back, skimming over my officers and stopping on me.

"Catherine," my teacher said.

The sound was muted, like he was speaking through a door.

"Black," I replied. "We're not due to scry until Evening Bell."

"Listen," he began, then the sound cut out again.

"I can't hear you," I told him.

"Danger," he managed. "Egg. The hills."

The water went still again and my blood ran cold.

"Masego," I spoke urgently, "can you-"

"Oh Merciless Gods," Ratface whispered.

I followed his gaze out the window, and my stomach dropped. Night had just fallen, but there was no trace of the stars out there. The sky was red as fresh blood, and tendrils of scarlet were spreading through the moon. A faint scream was heard in the distance. It rose higher, and higher, and higher until all of us were clutching our ears in pain. The pressure winked out as suddenly as it had appeared, but something had changed. I looked at Masego.

"You can feel it?" I asked.

"Yeah," he whispered, fingers clutched so tight the phalanges paled. "Shit. There's a demon on the loose."

Villainous Interlude: Coup de Théâtre

"Never hold anything in a cage you can't put back in, should it get out."

– Dread Emperor Terribilis II

Akua had spent most of her thirteenth summer pouring over all the writings authored by Dread Empress Malicia and her Calamities.

Neither Assassin nor Captain had ever put their name to anything, which had narrowed the field somewhat. Scribe, who could be considered an honorary Calamity of sorts, had written a single piece on organizational principles which had never been published and only ever circulated privately among high-ranking Legion officers. Some of what the woman had jotted down on the subject of redundancy in essential systems was useful, but none of it was ground-breaking. It confirmed Heiress' personal belief that the Scribe was a very talented administrator but not a threat independently of her master. Warlock had been the most prolific author, but all of it was related to either anomalous sorceries or broader magical theory. The sheer spectrum of experiments the man had been able to afford doing did indicate he had access to more wealth than was openly known, which was... interesting. It meant there was a material power base to attack, if she ever needed to distract him. Unfortunately, none of it gave any insight into the way the Sovereign of the Red Skies thought. Still, ultimately the stewards of the path Praes had taken over the last forty years were Dread Empress Malicia and her Black Knight.

Those had been the papers she'd sought the most ardently, though she'd not been the first Praesi aristocrat to seek insight into their ruler and her right hand. Lord Black had penned a handful of treatises on tactics, though they were not personal thoughts of his: merely reports of what techniques had and had not worked during the Conquest, as well as what made them fail when they did. There was a paper on the influence of the original Miezian legions on the Praesi ones, and why some of the leftover practices needed to be abandoned – it had, however, been written before the Conquest. All the suggested changes were long implemented. The only knowledge she'd gotten of that was that the man tended to focus on underlying structures when making changes: whatever he made, he built to last. *He dislikes retreating*, her mother had said. The last paper she'd gotten her hands on was the after-action report from his fortnight in Stygia. Not the censored one he'd given the Chancellor's office at the time but the one he'd smuggled to Malicia – then still a mere concubine.

Managing to have a copy transcribed had cost her a small fortune and the lives of seven family agents in the Tower but she'd found the prize worth it. Contrary to popular belief in the Wasteland, Black had apparently not gone to the city with a plan in mind. He'd found the weak points in the Stygian power structure, used Assassin to trigger a collapse and then ruthlessly played factions against one another until they were weak enough for him to impose the outcome he'd desired: a ruling Magister from the faction friendliest to the Empire. The assertion that he'd done the entire thing drunk she could safely dismiss as a jest to

amuse Malicia, for his predictions of enemy moves had been too consistently accurate. Back then Akua had simply noted that Lord Black was as dangerous when improvising as he was when operating according to a set plan, but now? Now she saw the pattern. *Foundling works the same way.* The two of them knew they were more skilled at exploiting chaos than their opponents, so they created chaos. Whether it harmed their own side did not matter, so long as it also hurt the enemy equally – the comparative advantage they gained from disorder still swung the balance in their favour.

Malicia's works were the most interesting, all in all. In her concubine days she'd written a history of the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One displaying a great deal of political acumen – as well as access to the private Imperial library, which was much more unusual. Members of the seraglio did not get passes unless they were nobly born, and Malicia's birth was as common as it came. The treatise on international politics she'd penned after her ascension to the throne was arguably the most important piece to be found and it was, in Akua's opinion, an abomination. Titled "The Death of the Age of Wonders", it laid out what Malicia believed the Dread Empire's stance abroad should be for the next few decades. Some of it was common wisdom: the application of political pressure in the Free Cities was an old favourite of Tyrants. But the rest, like reaching out to the Thalassocracy? Whether or not there was a need for a "counterweight south of Procer" was irrelevant: Ashur stood on the side of Good. No amount of shared interests would ever fill that gap. The need to keep Principate divided as she'd outlined was self-evident, but it was Heiress' belief that Malicia's ironclad avoidance of direct conflict had led the Empire directly to its current weakened position.

The Legions should have marched across the Vales decades ago instead of resting on their laurels, to burn Salia to the ground and permanently sunder the principalities.

The entire treatise had left Akua uneasy, and it was only years later she'd understood why. Malicia looked only forward, to a future she could shape with her own hands. The past glories of the Empire she dismissed as irrelevant at best and a hindrance at worst. *She thinks near all Tyrants before her were fools, as if she were the only clever woman to ever hold the Tower.* Akua Sahelian had been born to the ruling line of great and ancient Wolof, the only Imperial city never to be occupied by foreigners after the Declaration. As a child she'd played in the temple-mazes where her ancestors had sacrificed greenskins to the Gods, she'd grown a woman in the shade of the baked mud pyramids where rituals as old as Calernia still took place. Her very blood was running with the history of Praes, its madness and greatness both. To even entertain the pretence of wiping the slate clean with a new reign was to spit on all the Tower stood for. *We are*

the last of our breed, Malicia. The last great villains of Calernia, perhaps in all of Creation.

The drow of the Everdark had collapsed into bickering tribes unworthy of the ruins they haunted. The Chain of Hunger was nothing more than a horde of starving rats, as incapable of villainy as any other animal. The Dead King, that famed monster who'd turned his entire kingdom into undead and invaded the very devils who'd thought to trick him, had not stirred from beyond his borders in centuries. That the Lycaonese had been able to participate at all in the Proceran civil war was a sign of how far the lich had fallen – in olden days they would not have dared to strip even a single man from their walls. Stygia and Bellerophon had been muzzled by the other cities in the League, reduced to petty border disputes, and the same city of Helike that had broken the Principate's back under the Unconquered now flinched in the face of Procer's displeasure. All that was left was the Dread Empire, the Tower flying the black banner promising death and ruin to all who thought themselves beyond humbling. And now Dread Empress Malicia would have them turn their backs on that inheritance. It was enough to make a woman's blood boil.

But Akua remembered, and from this she drew strength. Dread Empress Triumphant – may she never return – had been born in Wolof, and had kept Wolofites close during her reign. She had not trusted them, but perhaps distrusted them less than others. Even as Praes collapsed in the face of the retribution wrought by an entire continent and two foreign empires besides, her ancestors had retreated beyond the high walls of their city and hoarded secrets now forgotten by everyone else. And so now Akua stood in the hills south of Marchford, the very city her rival was marching on after her victory against the Silver Spears.

Heiress had not bothered to bedeck herself in plate, though she owned several sets. That kind of cumbersome protection was hardly needed: the Soninke was a skilled swordswoman but it was a skill she'd acquired more to prevent a weakness than acquire an asset. She preferred for others to shed the blood for her, and had picked her entourage with that preference in mind. Her lacquered armour of overlapping steel scales was styled in the ancient style of Taghreb warriors, the skirt of scales making up the lower part splitting over her knee to reveal hardened leather boots. The rounded helmet protecting her head was wrapped by a scale aventail she'd covered with a red silk shawl, leaving an opening that revealed only her face. The entire set had been tailored and adjusted for her, of course – her curves were not easy to fit under such apparel, even after binding. Reining up her horse, the dark-skinned aristocrat stopped to survey the temple she had come to find.

It was a small and wretched thing, even if it had been built in stone. The single company of Proceran mercenaries she'd brought

with her had taken it without any trouble, falling on the unwary sentinels by surprise. The building did not appear on any maps, for it was not a place of worship – it was a prison, one designed by the provincials to keep one of the Hell Eggs forever unhatched. Barika rode up to her side, her ornate robes a ridiculous affectation in this barbarous country. The spells woven into the cloth made it hard as steel should anything strike the other woman, as the spells in Akua's own armour made it resistant to both extreme temperatures and foreign magic, but while such elegance would have been duly appreciated in Praes it was wasted effort out here. Callowans were a people of mud and shit, fit only for toiling fields save for a few superior breeds like the Deoraithe. Of all the members of Heiress' inner circle, Barika was the least valuable in and of herself: she was not as powerful a mage as Fadila, not a skilled warrior and leader of men like Ghassan and not an inherently valuable piece like Chider. She wasn't even particularly clever, though she was by no means stupid. *She is my most loyal, though, I will give her that.* The two women watched in silence as Commander Chider dragged the priest of the temple and slit open his throat with obvious relish, red gushing all over scarred hands as the undead goblin smiled.

"Whatever the necromancer did to bring her back," her childhood friend finally said, "it left... marks."

"Savagery can be useful, if properly leashed," Akua replied.

And there was no denying she held Chider's leash. The necromancy that bound the goblin's soul to her corpse and the enchantments that allowed the charred husk to actually move existed only as long as she allowed them to. Undeath, while technically granting magical properties to a corpse, did not allow individuals who'd lacked the talent before their demise to use sorcery. Chider had been born without the gift and so had no way to influence the magic that kept her in Creation. In the distance, Heiress glimpsed the man in command of her Proceran footsoldiers stalk towards her. Large and fierce, Arzachel of Valencis had proved himself when her host had taken Dormer by sneaking in under cover of night and opening the gates. The man moved with the fluidity of a large cat, and his hand was never far from the hooked falchion at his belt. From the moment she'd first met him there had been desire in his eyes when he looked at her, though Heiress was not inclined to indulge him. There were more suitable men if she felt like sharing her bed with anyone.

"The temple is secured, my lady," he announced, his Lower Miezian softly accented. "There were few with the priest, only old men and green ones."

"Good," Akua replied. "Have your soldiers clear the grounds. If anyone tries to enter..."

"I know the drill, Lady Heiress," he grinned. "Corpses all around."

The Procerans had been a good investment, she decided. Former soldiers from the warring principalities, they'd been exiled from the Principate for banditry and hostage-taking – something she'd found an asset more than a black mark. They had a talent for finding gold that had come in useful in southern Callow: she'd already made twice as much as she'd spent hiring them by pillaging rebel holdings. The Stygian slaves had proved to be less resourceful, but then she'd not expected initiative of them when buying their leash. Dismounting gracefully, Akua left behind the mercenaries and passed the two columns that marked the entrance to the inner temple. Barika followed cautiously, her unease at the thought of what lay inside all too visible. The structure was short compared to the high-ceilinged Houses of Light the provincials were so fond of building, hidden away between hills so it could not be seen from a distance. She found the inside to be miserably bare, all naked stone with only dirty beddings to decorate. The living conditions of dead men did not interest her, though.

What she'd come for was in the centre of the room, surrounded by markings of powdered chalk: a large standard plunged into the ground, pitch black with golden snake swallowing its own tail embroidered into the cloth. It moved to a breeze that did not exist, even contained like this. Before Triumphant – may she never return – the Empire's armies had merely been known as the Legions. The terror in the name had been earned by artefacts like this one, the vanguard of armies that had subjugated all of Calernia for the first and only time in its history.

"A Hell Egg," Barika said, catching up to her. "Gods, I never thought I'd see one."

"There are none in the Wasteland. She let all the demons she'd bound in Praes loose when the army of heroes assaulted the Tower," Heiress replied. "There is one another left in Callow, according to my records, and a handful in Procer."

What the greatest of the Tyrants had wrought was not easily undone. If it were the Sky Breaker and his wife would not still be bound at the summit of Cloudreach Peak, one cursed with endless hunger and the other with endless healing. It was said that the howls of anguish coming from them both still troubled the sleep of all who dwelled in the Titanomanchy, a reminder to the giants that defying Praes was never without cost.

"You'd think that a hero would have broken the bindings and killed the thing, after all these years," Barika said. "They're not limited the way villains are."

Demons were born of Evil, and so Evil could not destroy them – or so went the theory. Only the lapdogs of the Heavens had been gifted the ability to truly destroy a demon instead of merely jailing them or sending them back to the Upper Hells.

“I chose this one for a reason, Barika,” Heiress smiled. “A demon alone would be a great and mighty threat, yet Squire might be able to contain it until reinforcements came. But a demon from the Thirteenth Hell *and* a battalion of devils? That is another thing entirely.”

Devils grew stronger as they grew older, more cunning and more vicious. *And these have been bound on Creation for over eight hundred years.*

“Thirteenth Hell,” a third voice mused. “Corruption, isn’t it? Well, that’s going to be a fucking mess.”

Akua’s sword cleared the scabbard before the first word was finished. Barika’s hands wreathed themselves in roiling shadow, barely contained. A woman was leaning against the wall in the back, a silvery flask in hand and a lute hanging off a leather strap going across chest. Taghreb? No, Ashuran. Heiress had met some of their kind in Mercantis. Not one of Squire’s known associates. Lord Black’s? *Wrong direction, this is Callowan holy ground.* There was one known heroine part of the Lone Swordsman’s crew who was from the Thalassocracy – the Wandering Bard. That could be a problem, she thought coldly. All the Bard variations were more dangerous than their commonly ascribed ineptitude would have one believe. They were harder to kill than cockroaches, for one, and their entire Role family instinctively understood things about the way Creation worked that even archmages could only grasp at. One of the running theories as to why even villains who should know better let them talk was that they practiced a softer form of Speaking, one that influenced instead of commanded.

“Impressive stuff, ladies,” the hawk-nosed woman praised them, “but it won’t do you any good.”

“And why,” Akua asked softly, “would that be?”

The dark-haired stranger wiggled her eyebrows.

“Because I’m invincible, of course,” she informed them cheerfully.

The Soninke aristocrat kept her face blank, resisting the urge to cast a worried glance at the standard. That kind of talk was like sending a written invitation to the Gods to make the opposite point. And yet, nothing happened. *If a villain had dared to say that, the roof would have collapsed on their heads.*

"You're the Bard," Barika said suddenly, finally catching up. "The one that was in Summerholm with the Lone Swordsman."

"That's me," the heroine agreed. "Almorava of Symra, at your service. Well, not really since you're dastardly villains, but you get my meaning."

"I commend you on passing Arzachel's picket," Heiress said, ignoring the digression, "but you seem to have squandered the element of surprise."

The woman chuckled and wiped her mouth on her sleeve after taking a long pull from her flask. Akua sneered at the lack of manners.

"Didn't walk here, sweetling. I try not to think about how that works too much. But you know us Bards," Almorava smiled. "We Wander into all sorts of places."

"And you mean to stop us?" Barika snorted. "You overestimate the strength of your Name, singer."

"Wow," the heroine huffed. "Rude. What is it with villains and getting personal? I'm not even here to get in your way. You finally decided to get plot relevant so I'm having a look, is all."

"You would stand aside and let us free a demon on Callowan soil?" Akua asked sceptically.

"Pretty much," Almorava shrugged. "I mean, it's a shit plan so why would I stop you? I'm a little surprised, though, I'll admit. Foundling thinks with her fists and Willy thinks three days after the battle's over, so by default you're supposed to be the mastermind of this story. But *clearly* there's no way letting loose a personification of the concept of corruption could ever backfire, right?"

"What you westerners know of demons could not even fill a thimble," Akua replied flatly, then immediately clamped down on her temper.

An insult this puerile should not have been able to get under her skin, but the casual disrespect she was being offered had her taken aback. Even Foundling, irreverent guttersnipe that she was, had learned to watch her mouth around her. The Bard raised a hand in appeasement as she polished off another part of her flask. Heiress frowned – how much alcohol could there possibly be in a receptacle that large? Had the flask been made bottomless? *That would be absurd. A working that rare and powerful would cost a fortune, even in Praes.*

"No need to get all offended," the heroine said. "I'm just wondering what your deal is. Like, what is it you *do*? Being rich and pretty isn't actually a magical power, sweetheart."

"It seems your own deal is being a drunken twit," Heiress smiled pleasantly.

"Oooh," Almorava purred. "You're one of *those*. Old school Praesi villain, with a closetful of self-importance and megalomania. At least that finally explains why your schemes are so terrible."

These were more familiar grounds. This was close enough to court intrigue Akua could glimpse her opponent's intent, and the attempt being made was feeble.

"This would be the part where I lose my temper and reveal all my plans to you, I imagine," Heiress noted calmly.

The Bard grinned. "Can't blame a girl for trying. But I was actually referring to your little operation in the south."

"You mean our *victories* in the south," Barika corrected sneeringly.

"You know what's not going to be a great victory?" Almorava said. "Allowing two thousand slaves to come into contact with a hero. In private Willy's got all the charm of kettle of fish, I'll grant you, but out in the field? You don't need to be a Bard to predict how that's gonna go."

"Slavery is illegal under Tower law," Akua replied. "They are all free men."

The heroine rolled her eyes. "I'm sure they volunteered to fight a war on foreign soil because you asked nicely. Well, you girls have fun with your hilariously ill-advised plan. The battle's about to start, so I'm needed elsewhere."

The shadows still wreathing Barika's hands formed into long whips and she stepped forward.

"I think not," the mage said. "You'll be our guest for a while, Bard."

"Nice delivery," Almorava praised. "Way to work that sinister intonation. But I see you your creepy shadow tentacles and raise you... *the Sands of Deception!*"

Shoving her free hand in a pocket, the heroine took out a handful of sand and threw it in Barika's face. The mage coughed and lashed out blindly with the shadows while Heiress carefully stepped out of the way, unsure what the effect of the artefact would be. When she went to flank the Bard, though, she found the irritating wretch was gone. *Outside my line of sight for the*

blink of an eye, and she disappears. That is a very, very dangerous ability. There had to be limitations: Names were never this generous without taking a toll of some sort, or adding restrictive clauses to how the power could be used. Barika allowed the shadows to lapse when she realized they were now alone in the temple, picking the grains out of her robes.

"This is just regular sand," the mage noted, confounded. "... Wait, is *that* the deception?"

Akua had never more keenly understood the age-old Praesi tradition of summarily executing one's subordinates. She let out a slow breath and mastered herself. This entire interlude had been somewhat frustrating, but ultimately it changed nothing.

"She's right, though, isn't she?" Barika spoke hesitantly after a moment. "Why did you leave the Stygians with Ghassan if you knew they'd have to fight the Lone Swordsman?"

Heiress walked up to the standard, idly smudging the protective powdered chalk patterns the priests had been making for centuries with her foot. That should weaken the pattern enough that the demon would break out within the next two days – already she could feel a presence inside the artefact stirring awake, tasting the damaged holding spells. It would not do to linger here.

"For the same reason we play shatranj, you and I," Akua finally replied.

Heiress had never enjoyed the game. It was horridly simple, two sides with equal capabilities taking each other's pieces in a slaughter without elegance. And yet she was known for playing it, because she had willed it so. As a youth her mother had introduced to *baduk*, a game from the kingdom beyond the lands of the Yan Tei, and this one she'd actually come to enjoy a great deal. Baduk was not about a limited handful of sequences, it was about positioning. The word meant "encircling game", and Akua had not played it once since she'd come into her Name. *For the same reason you don't know I'm a better mage than you are, Barika.* So long as everyone else thought they knew what game she was playing, they predicted her moves accordingly and thought they understood her designs. Her enemies had yet to grasp the most salient of all truths: in games as in all things, the only move that mattered was the last.

She'd been setting up hers from the moment she'd first laid eyes on the Squire.

Heroic Interlude: Attaque au Fer

"Those who clap others in irons always end up choking on them."
– Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty

The Baroness Dormer was strikingly beautiful.

Hair like spun silver, men said, and even in her late thirties the sight of her smiling was enough to make his breath catch in his throat. William was evidently not immune to her charms, though he fancied he was less swayed by them than most. Still, of all the nobles involved in the Liesse Rebellion he thought her the best of the bunch. Unlike the Duke of Liesse and his now-betrothed the Countess Marchford, he knew that ambition did not drive the woman sitting across from him. Her fief would not grow from the liberation of Callow, and given her long-running enmity with Countess Elizabeth there would be no position of influence at court for her in the aftermath. She'd joined her force to the Rebellion because she wanted the land of her ancestors to be free, and such a purity of intent was laudable. Not often rewarded, but perhaps all the more laudable for that.

"I can bring five thousand to bear, though I hesitate to commit some of them to a battle," the baroness said. "They are peasant volunteers, untrained in the arts of war."

"Your household troops can take the lead," the Lone Swordsman replied. "I don't suppose you've managed to scrape up some knights?"

Chivalric orders had been disbanded wholesale after the Conquest, but the south of Callow had never truly been invaded – after the fall of Laure and the submission of the Deoraithe, the flight into exile of the Duke of Liesse had been enough to tip the balance towards surrender. The only southern demesne with an Imperial Governor assigned had been Liesse itself, and though William knew better than to think the entire sector had not been crawling with the Black Knight's spies the scrutiny of the Tower had not been as heavy down there. In northwest and central Callow the capitulation of the Kingdom had been greeted with wholesale butchery of horse herds across the land: the old promise that Praesi would never manage to suborn Callowan cavalry had been faithfully observed. Down south, though, some smaller herds had remained in the hands of nobles. Flat refusal to sell any to the Tower had caused tensions and threatened an uprising the year following the Conquest when a general had tried to force the issue, but in the end orders had come from above to let the matter go.

"I had half a hundred when we started the war," the aristocrat replied, "but they're all with Talbot now."

"We'll make do," William sighed. "If she's to fight the Legions of Terror on the field, she needs all the help she can get."

"Especially now," the baroness murmured.

The Lone Swordsman grimaced. Word of Foundling's unexpected victory against the Silver Spears had already spread even this far. Mages in Marchford, he expected. Now that the Praesi had made popular the use of scrying rumours flew even faster than messenger birds. *I warned you, Prince. One misstep is all she needs.* With the eastern flank secure, the Ninth and Sixth legions could march towards Vale with their supply train safe. Countess Elizabeth would not be facing tired, half-starved soldiers: she'd be staring down the war machine that had triumphed on the Fields of Streges in the fullness of its might. At least it was only two legions: if it had been three or four the rebellion could be considered as good as over.

"She'll hold," William promised. "As soon as we've dealt with the Heiress' host we'll move to reinforce her."

"I am glad you heeded my call," the silver-haired beauty admitted. "Fighting a Stygian phalanx would have been bad enough on its own, but with a Named to lead them? I dared not force a battle with the forces at my disposal."

"You were right to wait," the Lone Swordsman said. "I've never been to Stygia but the Bard assures me the tales are true – on even ground they are one of the finest in the land."

The formation the slave-soldiers took in battle was a slow and cumbersome thing, but it had shredded hosts from Procer and the other Free Cities both. The Stygians did not retreat or hesitate, for the leather cord around their neck could choke them in an instant should the person owning them wish it.

"So much for the Praesi being above slavery," the baroness scoffed. "I used to consider it their one redeeming feature."

"The Heiress is from the old breed of eastern villainy," William acknowledged. "They tend to break even their own rules when it gains them advantage. Keep priests close, I would not put it above her to summon devils if things go sour."

The House of Light did not officially take sides in mortal conflicts, though it occasionally did produce a clerical Named who carried the banner of the Heavens into battle. Mundane priests who felt the calling to combat Evil could join religious martial orders but those were not part of the House proper, merely affiliated with it – hence why the Empire had slaughtered every last paladin from the Order of the White Hand but allowed the many churches and cathedrals in Callow to continue existing after the annexation. Most priests did, however, take a very dim view of bringing devils and demons into Creation. Those they would fight regardless of who did the summoning.

"I'll make sure to have them on hand," the aristocrat replied. "Luck in battle, Lord Swordsman."

William smiled thinly. "That'd be a first."

—

The tent they'd prepared for him had a cot and a table, the latter of which he would never use. The dark-haired man was no general and he knew as much — the strategizing was better left to individuals with a talent for it. The one time he'd thought he had a plan he'd gotten almost all of the people he'd brought with him killed, including another hero and the only observer the Duchess of Daoine had bothered to send. Taking off his coat, the Swordsman threw it on the cot. He'd been about to sit down and remove his boots when he paused, smoothly unsheathing his sword and bringing the edge to rest against the throat of the other Named in the tent.

"One of these days," Thief said, "you'll tell me how you do that."

"Unlikely," William replied.

Forcing the Penitent's Blade back into its scabbard was an effort. It disliked returning without having drawn blood, even if no one worthy of being bled was around.

"I wasn't sure you'd come back," he admitted a moment later.

"I wasn't sure I would," the short-haired girl shrugged. "But here I am."

With a tired sigh, William sat down on his cot as she perched herself on his table.

"I'm sure you've noticed the host surrounding us," he began. "We'll be marching on the Praesi army camped by Lake Hengest tomorrow."

"They're not camped by the lake anymore," the Thief informed him. "I paid them a little visit while considering my options. They're half a day's march away from you now, though they've stopped for the night."

He did not insult her by asking if she was sure of this. It would be the same as if someone asked him if he was certain his guard stance was correct.

"Heiress knows we're after her, then," he grunted in dissatisfaction.

It had been too much to hope for that she wouldn't see them coming. Still, he was confident in his chances against this particular villain — unlike Squire in Summerholm, she wasn't fate-bound to survive the encounter with him.

"Heiress isn't with the army anymore," the pale-skinned heroine corrected him. "She took the commander of her Proceran mercenaries with her and went into the hills. The man in charge is some Wastelander lordling called Ghassan."

The Swordsman honestly wasn't sure whether to be pleased by the news or not. Lack of a Named meant their victory was all but certain, but what in the Burning Heavens was the villain doing in the hills? An army couldn't pass through them. That much was common knowledge in Callow.

"Where's Bard, anyhow?" Thief asked.

William snorted. "You know Almorava. She comes and goes as she wills. For all I know she's passed-out drunk in some ditch and she'll catch up tomorrow."

Thief – she'd never revealed her true name to them – shook her head.

"William, you should know better by now. She drinks like a fish, but when have you ever seen her *drunk*?"

The Swordsman raised an eyebrow. "Every day since she first crashed through the window over the room where I'd assembled the rest of you."

Apparently Almorava had meant to sit on the windowsill to look mysterious and all-knowing but slipped on rain-slick stone and fallen through the glass. The sultry pose she'd tried to affect afterwards had been largely negated by the fact that her face was bleeding heavily.

"The thing about being a thief," the heroine said, "is that you have to learn to read people. Catch when they're tired enough to dismiss footsteps on a rooftop, guess when they're so impatient they'll send a replacement servant through instead of checking the story."

She drummed her fingers against the table, crossing one leg over the other.

"She plays it up well, the clumsiness and the slurring, but no matter how much hard liquor she puts away she's never been more than tipsy."

"You think she's deceiving us," William frowned.

"I think she's playing it up for her audience," Thief replied. "Isn't that what Bards do?"

"She's a heroine," the Swordsman eventually said. "That much can't be faked. Why would she bother to trick us when she's on our side?"

The other Callowan passed a hand through her short hair, ruffling the tomboy cut as an uncomfortable look settled on her face.

"When we left for Summerholm, there were five heroes in our band," the heroine said. "And we all knew going in that one of us would die to the Warlock – monsters like that don't go easy. It couldn't be you, because you have a mirror on the other side. Hunter was meant to be your right hand, ill-suited as he was to the role. You needed me to get into the city and to get out afterwards. That left..."

"Almorava and Simeon," William finished. "Your point?"

"Both of them are bumlbers," Thief spoke quietly. "There was a redundancy. But how much of an impression did Conjurer make, compared to the Bard? He barely talked while she was always in the background, larger than life, drinking and badly strumming her lute."

The Swordsman breathed in sharply. "What you're suggesting borders on murder."

"All she did was cover her bases," she replied. "I can respect that, I really can. But I can't trust it."

"Almorava has always given me good counsel," William said hesitantly.

"She's given you advice that keeps her story moving along," Thief retorted. "And I don't know about you, but I'm not looking for a starring role in a tragedy."

The dark-haired hero chuckled mirthlessly. "You might have joined the wrong cause, then."

"Oh *fuck this*," she snapped, falling to her feet. "I've had enough of the tormented warrior tourine. I don't care how fucking tragic your backstory is: *this isn't about you*. You wanna know why I came back? Because even if you screwed up spectacularly in Summerholm, you're still the only option we've got. I've stolen some outrageous stuff in my time, but an entire kingdom? The Empire makes my Name a mockery every day, and it's not going away on its own. So put on your big boy pants and get your shit together, William. Nobody's asking you to clean up every mess in Callow, just to kill some villains with your godsdamned horrifying angel sword."

Fury flashed through the Swordsman's veins but he kept a lid on it. He'd earned this much and worse, for his failure against Warlock.

"I tried that, if you'll recall," he replied sharply. "It got Simeon killed and lost us our best chance at getting Daoine into the war."

"Because you went about it wrong," Thief informed him bluntly. "You're the *Lone Swordsman*. The whole band of heroes motif runs against your Role. Gods know you couldn't stand us half the time, anyway, and to be honest spending more than a day at a time with you makes me want to jump off the nearest cliff."

"The whole point of assembling heroes was to even the odds against the Calamities," the dark-haired man barked back, patience running thin.

"And that worked out great," the heroine snorted. "So what if the odds are horrible? That's what heroes *do*. Hells, when I first heard about you you were the guy who'd assassinated an Imperial Governess in broad daylight and blown up half of General Sacker's face. You're not incompetent, William. What you can't handle, we will. Stop doing the things you think are clever and start doing what you're actually good at."

"And what," the Swordsman replied coldly, "would that be?"

She tossed a parchment at him.

"Here's a plan of the Praesi encampments. Kill the people that need killing. And before you slaughter your way through every officer in there, I want you to consider something."

Thief leaned forward and looked into his eyes.

"Do you know what an antihero is? An idiot who thinks they can use Evil's own methods to beat it. Here's the thing about Evil, though – they've used those methods for a lot longer than you. *They're better at them*. If you want to make a better world, maybe you should act like someone who deserves to live in it."

She walked out of the tent before he could think of something to reply. It took him a quarter bell to realize that at some point during the conversation she'd stolen his purse.

—

The moon was almost full.

The white-enamelled armour he'd taken to wearing after the Hanging was back in his tent, traded in for his old chainmail and leather coat. It was... comfortable. Like he'd shed a skin that didn't quite fit for one that did. The Stygians ran a good camp, with sentinels patrolling regularly, but that was the weakness in their system. Fixed intervals made it easy to infiltrate the place, once he knew the pattern. *It wouldn't do for the slaves to*

show initiative, would it? he thought with disgust. How many times had the whip been cracked on their back, before the ability to improvise had been beaten out of them for good? For all that Stygia was one the Free Cities, few enough of the men living there knew anything of freedom. Moving from shadow to shadow, William made his way to the large tent in the centre of the camp. Thief had marked it as the officer's tent, and even from where he stood he could see lamps had been lit inside. Leaning behind a crate full of rations, the Swordsman waited as a single man passed him by on the way to the latrine trench. The wind moved a tent flap and the olive-skinned soldier glanced in his direction, mouth opening in surprise.

William's fist impacted with his stomach, knocking the breath out of him. An armoured elbow to the back of the head saw the slave fall into unconsciousness, his body unceremoniously dumped into the crate where no one would find it. The hero hastened his steps after that: eventually someone would realize a man was missing, and the alarm would be raised.

There were more guards around the command tent, a tenth on patrol and one sentinel at every corner of the square hide structure. The patrol he outwaited, crouched behind a rack of pikes, but for the others he'd have to take a more proactive approach. Loosening the strap binding his sheathed sword to his belt, William took the makeshift blunt weapon in hand and closed his eyes. Breath in, breath out. His Name lit up inside him, turning his blood to smoke and dust. The cold strength took hold of him and in a single leaping bound he crossed the distance between himself and the closest guard, the pommel of the Penitent's Blade hitting the back of his head. He could see the other guard in the back of the tent beginning to turn in his direction, but the movement was comically slow. The man might as well have been swimming through mud. Three steps blurred and the flat of the sheathed sword slapped the chin upwards, the strength of the blow enough that just sailing through the air it caused a small gust of wind. He had to catch the man by the back of the neck to prevent his unconscious body flying into the back of the command tent. Setting down the sentinel gently, he stepped away to drag the first one out of sight as well before Creation began to catch up with him. He let out a long breath, letting the power flow out of him.

Quietly, he unsheathed his dagger and cut a flap for him to slip inside. Eight men, he counted when taking a first glimpse. All olive-skinned with their heads shaved closely and wearing nothing but brown cloth pants and a leather cord around their necks. Miezani numerals had been branded between their shoulder blades. A man in his late fifties had a one, he glimpsed a pair of twos and the rest were threes. *Officer rankings*. He'd heard Stygian slavemasters gave sets of enchanted irons to burn away the numbers and brand new ones when the purchase was made, to

accommodate field promotions. The inside of the tent was bare, with eight cots on the ground and a single low table where they were all seated on the ground. A carafe of wine sat in the middle of the table, with eight clay cups around it that were still mostly full. Sheathed short swords were laid on the ground behind each of them, within easy reach. They noticed the moment he entered the tent, and all the three reached for their weapons – but the highest officer present raised a hand to stop them.

“Hero,” he said, his Lower Miezan lightly accented.

“Lone Swordsman,” William introduced himself.

“First Spear Ophon,” the man replied.

One of the officers spoke in a tongue the hero didn’t recognize, but Ophon smiled sadly.

“I’m afraid we are all already dead, Parthe,” he said. “Finish your cup. Raising an alarm will only cause the death of more brothers before he leaves.”

William stepped closer, then cast a look at the leader.

“May I?” he asked.

The older man looked amused. “By all means.”

He sat himself between the twos, setting the Penitent’s Blade across his lap. Ophon said something in the same tongue as earlier and the younger man picked up a cup and poured him wine, glaring heatedly all the while. William took a small sip, having no idea whatsoever whether this was a good vintage or not. He’d always preferred ale to wine in those rare instances he drank.

“You are here to kill us, yes?” Ophon asked mildly. “To hurt your enemy.”

William set down his cup. “You don’t sound very worried about that,” he observed.

“I have seen heroes fight, unlike these young men,” the leader replied. “I know the strength of a Name. Struggle will just mean a bad death. I would rather leave Creation peacefully, enjoying my last cup of wine.”

“Spears of Stygia do not break,” the man to William’s left broke in.

“Three cities stand between us and the Magisters, Thenian,” Ophon gently chided, “yet I hear their words still.”

The younger man looked down, abashed.

"I'd heard Heiress had freed you," the Lone Swordsman murmured.

The man from earlier, Parthe, scoffed.

"Free, yes. Slaves do not get pay, she said, and we are to be paid after the war. Yet we bear the Strangler still," he spat, tapping the leather cord around his neck. "A strange thing, this Praesi freedom."

"Gifts from the Wasteland are always poisoned," William said. "My people have learned that the hard way."

"Yet it is not the Heiress who has come from our lives," Thenian barked. "No matter the side, it is always the brothers who pay the corpse-price. My people have learned this the hard way."

The Lone Swordsman brought the cup to his lips again. If he decided so, he could have every man in this tent dead before the cup hit the table. *Swing*, his third aspect. Not even Squire had been able to match his hits when he tapped into it, whether in swiftness or strength. The hero calmly put down his cup, rose to his feet, and let his Name flood his frame. The power spread through the air, thick and lingering. William put his hand on the hilt of his sword and followed his instincts.

One after the other, the leather cords dropped.

"There are no slaves in the Kingdom of Callow," he said. "Not as long as I live."

Most of them groped blindly for the collar they had been branded with since birth, faces alight with wonder at the reality that they could no longer die to whim of anyone owning their command rod. Not Ophon, though. Ophon finished his cup of wine with guarded eyes.

"And what, I wonder, is the price of this freedom?" he asked quietly.

The light winked out of the others' eyes, and it made William want to flinch. Because he knew, here and now, that he could convince them to fight for him. He could feel the pivot forming, the weighted decision that would set the course of Fate. And the rebellion needed the troops so very badly, didn't it? They would still be free, and fighting for a just cause. *Would I not have been tempted, if I were a better man?* Maybe. But he'd just seen the joy, and seen it disappear. Even now the faces shuttered at the prospect of trading one master for yet another. *If you want to make a better world*, Thief had said, *maybe you should act like someone who deserves to live in it.*

"Nothing," he replied, and the words tasted like ashes in his mouth. "Once, years ago, my sister told me that freedom is the

Gods-given right of everyone who was ever born. Would that I had listened to her sooner."

He settled the sword back at his hip.

"I'll need one of you to escort me as I go around the camp breaking the cords," he said. "I can draw you a map if you need one, but south of Dormer along the river you should be able to find passage to Mercantis. There will be a battle with the Proceran mercenaries tomorrow, so I'd recommend swinging around north to be careful."

Ophon poured himself a second cup. A long moment of silence passed, as all the others watched him carefully

"Above the gates of Stygia there is a statue of a magister," he finally spoke. "He is a tall, proud man this magister. On his shoulders are two cranes, named Redress and Retribution. They are the patron spirits of the city, said to speak in the dreams of those deemed worthy."

The soldier peered into his cup.

"Never has a slave been graced with such favour, but all men of Stygia live with that hope – even those who are not men at all, by the laws of the city."

Ophon smiled.

"I am an old man, hero," he said. "I find I no longer have the patience to wait for the cranes. I would seek redress, of this girl who bought me. I would seek retribution, for the lie of false freedom."

"First Spear-" one of the threes began.

"You are still young, Mamer," he interrupted gently. "Do not be so eager to follow. You still have a life ahead of you."

"Spears of Stygia do not break," the two who'd remained silent until now rasped out. "Oaths were given. I would seek the cranes with my brother Ophon."

"Retribution," Thenian agreed softly, hands closing around his sword.

"Redress," Parthe growled, and it had the weight of a promise.

William smiled, and for the first time in years it was genuine.

Chapter 22: Rescue

"Prayer and a sword gets better results than prayer alone."

– King Jehan the Wise

The words had barely left Masego's mouth that my officers exploded into chatter, the panic-tinged voices struggling against one another. Two exceptions stood apart: Hakram rose to calmly pour himself a cup of wine he tossed back instantly, then frowned and poured himself a second. After a heartbeat he grabbed another cup, filled it and handed the wine to the other exception – Juniper, who took it without looking. She wasn't paying attention to the mess of voices, instead eyeing a bare bones map of Marchford county. It wasn't Imperial work, so it wasn't as precise as the fare we'd both become used to. I allowed the babble to go on a moment longer, then slammed my palm against the table. It made a sound like a sharper exploding, and in the wake of it silence fell. A moment later a crack spread across a whitewood table that looked like it was at least a hundred years old, but I valiantly managed to ignore the fact I'd just messed up an heirloom worth twice my yearly salary.

"Now that I have your attention," I spoke calmly. "You're the ranking officers in the Fifteenth, fucking act like it."

I met their eyes calmly until the message had sunken in, then continued.

"Good. Masego can you narrow down where the demon is? Wait, scratch that, can you tell me *what* it is?"

Apprentice grimaced. "Hell Egg. There's a Hell Egg in the hills. That's what Lord Black was trying to say," he said after a moment, my teacher's title sounding almost sardonic in his mouth.

He was more used to calling him Uncle Amadeus, much as I found the idea of Black being anyone's uncle utterly horrifying.

"Pretend I don't know what that is," I sighed.

"Dread Empress Triumphant–"

"May she never return," everyone but him and I muttered, pressing a knuckle to their forehead.

"That's going to get old fast," I noted.

"That one Empress," Apprentice spoke peevishly, "used demons and devils when she conquered Calernia. Most demons were bound to the standards of her legions, though she kept several on hand for her personal use. By the time she died and collapsed the Tower on top

of the heroes that came for her, there were only a handful of standards left."

He paused, gratefully taking a cup of wine I hadn't seen Hakram pour for him. I suppose we could all use a liquid courage, right now.

"Black assigned Father to find those in our newly-acquired territory after the Conquest," he continued, already forgetting the lordly courtesy he'd tacked on earlier. "There's one near Harrow he built additional wards over. He suspected there was one in the hills around Marchford, but he could never be sure – there was some kind of priestly ward protecting it, and Imperial policy is to leave those alone unless they're a direct threat."

I cleared my throat. "The history lesson is nice and the Harrow location is as of now under seal by my authority as the Squire, but that doesn't tell us what kind of demon it is. Is it a madness one, like the one she dropped on Laure?"

Nine inhabitants out of ten had died in the wake of that particular abomination of a war tactic, including the entire Alban royal line. He shook his head.

"It has to be absence or corruption," he replied. "All the others are accounted for. I'm inclined towards corruption, considering we remember why we need to have this conversation at all."

A shiver went up my spine at that, I was unashamed to admit. Every Callowan was raised on stories about what demons could do when let loose, and both of those kinds had famous legends to their names. An absence demon was widely believed to be the reason the entire Yan Tei Empire had no mention of it anywhere during two centuries and then had suddenly reappeared in the histories. People hadn't even noticed it was gone, or even that anything had been missing at all. As for corruption... there were tales of an elven forest kingdom on the other side of the Tyrian Sea, where a stranger had once laid a single finger on the jewel that was the heart of the woods. Within a fortnight the entire kingdom had been turned into ravening beasts that fed on blood and bones, killing thousands before they were mercifully put down by heroes. That was perhaps the most terrifying thing about demons: most of what they did could not be undone. It scarred Creation permanently.

"We'll operate under the assumption of corruption for now," I said. "Any objections?"

Shaken heads all around.

"Lord Apprentice," Commander Hune spoke softly. "Do you have any idea who could have set this demon loose? Did the Silver Spears disturb wards in their flight south?"

Oh, Weeping Heavens. The mercenaries were in the hills, where *the fucking embodiment of corruption* was. That wasn't going to end well for anyone involved.

"-has been the target of sabotage on her part several times before, I'm given to understand," Masego was saying when I started paying attention to her again. "Wolof has the best historical records in the Empire, I wouldn't put knowledge of the location past her."

"It's Heiress," I spoke flatly, cutting to the chase. "It's always godsdamned Heiress, when things go to shit like this. The Lone Swordsman is a first rate prick but he's not the demon-summoning type. I doubt anyone else on the rebel side would have the ability to break wards good enough to hold back a demon or the balls to go through with it."

Hune blinked. "She's an Imperial citizen," the ogre said slowly. "We are in the middle of military operations against a threat to Praesi hegemony. This is... absurd. What could she possibly gain from this?"

"She wants to bleed the Fifteenth, I'd imagine," I replied. "Or discredit it us so that her own contributions to the war effort look better in comparison. She's only invested in putting down the rebellion insofar as it advances her own position, Hune. If she's the last woman standing when the dust over this mess settles, she gets all the rewards."

"Trust a human to manage fucking up a perfectly good war," Juniper growled. "No offense meant, Aisha."

Ratface, it seemed, did not even rank a half-assed apology. I probably shouldn't have been as amused by that as I was.

"A little taken," Aisha replied drily. "Akua Sahelian is a wretched bitch with more ambition than sense, if you'll all forgive my language. Wolofites are a notoriously proud and fickle lot."

Well, if there was one constant in Creation it was that whenever there were two Praesi nobles in a room there'd be at least three differing opinions offered about every subject. Still, I filed away the distaste in Aisha's tone for further reference – I'd taken her into the Fifteenth at Juniper's request and had never been given reason to complain about her service, but it had not escaped my attention that she was the most politically-connected of my officers. If she were a mage, she'd be my strongest candidate for who was leaking information to Heiress. It didn't matter how far down the line of succession she was, in the Wasteland blood had a way of telling.

"So, corruption," I spoke, getting us back on subject.
"Apprentice, you're the closest thing to an expert we have on this. Any chance the Silver Spears will get out of the hills before they get all..."

I waved a hand around vaguely to get my point across, the precise adjective for this situation escaping me. The Soninke mage massaged his forehead as he thought.

"No," he finally replied. "Demons of corruption become a locus of the concept the moment they're in phase with Creation. The area they can affect grows over time, but the Tower has anecdotal evidence implying that even from the first contact it can carry over several miles."

I frowned. "Nobody's ever tried to chart this?"

"Once," Apprentice admitted. "The Warlock who did went mad while trying to write down the numbers and three floors of the Tower had to be torched before the... things that formed could spread any further."

Well, that wasn't ominous at all.

"So marching the whole legion on the bastard isn't a solution, then," Nauk grunted. "Fine, if numbers don't work we can still solve this the way the Fifteenth deals with most problems. This whole corruption bullshit takes time, right? We've still got goblinfire. Let's send a sapper company in and set the fucker on fire."

"I'm not sure whether that would work," Pickler replied. "As far as I know it's never been used on demons. Part of that is that the substance has only been around for two hundred years and demon summoning is rare, but we'd be committing on a long shot."

"We're not committing to anything," I said. "We're bailing, is what we're doing. Masego, can you narrow down its location? Unless it's right on top of us we're getting the Hells out of here."

"Demons leave marks in Creation wherever they are," Apprentice acknowledged. "I know a ritual that could triangulate its location. I can't use it much, though, Catherine. It will notice, and corruption works on magic too. Three times at most."

He didn't need to elaborate on how much damage an embodiment of corruption could wreak, given a thaumaturgical link to a mage of Masego's calibre.

"Legion doctrine when presented with first class special asset is to retreat to a choke point, fortify and send for reinforcements," Juniper said. "We could make it back to the ford

in four days with forced marches, and from there we should be able to scry for further instructions."

I shook my head. "We won't be able to go that fast," I told her. "The people of Marchford are civilians, they can't keep that kind of pace."

There was a moment of silence. I realized with a sinking feeling that everyone in the room had expected me to leave them behind.

"Catherine," Ratface said hesitantly. "There's at least eight thousand people in the city right now. Just getting them in shape for an evacuation would take days, and that's if they cooperate. Which they won't."

"By that time we will have corrupted cataphracts to deal with and worse," Hune spoke softly. "We don't have the men to protect a body of people that large when on the move."

Aisha said nothing, only casting a look at Juniper whose face had gone utterly blank. Without a word Nauk moved around the table and came to stand by my side. Pickler cursed softly, then did the same. Hakram poured himself a third cup of wine. Masego claimed a chair and propped up his feet on the table, looking fascinated with the whole situation.

"They're rebels," the Hellhound said flatly.

"They surrendered," I replied. "They are now Imperial citizens again, with all entitled protections."

"Until that surrender has been accepted by the Tower their legal status is unclear," the legate growled. "Regardless, decisions about legion deployment are at the discretion of field commanders when higher authority cannot be reached."

"We have a mandate to protect imperial interests," Adjutant contributed mildly.

"Imperial interest here is not to destroy the Fifteenth failing to save people who support a rebellion against Praes," Juniper barked. "You're not thinking with your head, Foundling. This is sheer fucking sentimentality, and feelings have no place in the thought process of an officer."

Slowly, carefully, I let out a breath.

"I could tell you," I spoke softly, "that feeding that many people to corruption is the makings of a disaster. I could tell you that if word got out a legion abandoned a city to a demon every major city in Callow would rise in rebellion before summer comes. Gods, I could even say that the demon is a Praesi mess and the Praesi should clean it up."

My eyes hardened.

"But that's not why I'm making this decision. There are eight thousand innocents in Marchford, Juniper. I refuse to abandon them."

"And by doing that, you're risking the life of every man and woman under your command," the grim-faced orc said. "Your soldiers, dying so your conscience is clear."

"Is Callow part of the Empire?" I asked. No reply, and Juniper seemed wary. "Anyone, feel free to answer."

Ratface cleared his throat. "I don't think anyone is denying that, Lady Foundling" he said.

I bared my teeth.

"That's funny, because if this was Aksum or Kahtan we were talking about I don't think anybody would be arguing about how we should or shouldn't be feeding *eight fucking thousand people* to a demon," I snarled.

"Marchford rebelled against the Tower," Aisha said, though she did not meet my eyes.

"So did every city in the Wasteland, at some point," I retorted. "Hells, not even fifty years ago two thirds of the High Lords were backing the bid for the throne of the Empress' sworn enemy."

"There's been seven goblin rebellions, and nearly an eight under Nefarious," Pickler added in an undertone, and for that I could have kissed her.

"The Empire's talked a good game since the Conquest," I said. "But now's the time where we find out whether it was all empty words after all. Does Praes stay the course, when it costs something to do it? Taking a country isn't enough to rule it, Juniper. That has to be *earned*. If Callow is part of the Empire, then our oaths apply to it. Every soul within its borders is under our protection, whether that means fighting Procer or the Free Cities or the children of Hell. We don't get to pick and choose who those oaths apply to."

My eyes swept across my officers.

"The eyes of the rest of Calernia are on us. So tell me, all of you – are we hypocrites or not?"

"Not," Nauk chuckled, running his tongue over his teeth. "Doesn't matter who we fight, Hellhound. The Fifteenth wins, that's all there is to it."

"Not," Pickler agreed. "I've always been curious as to whether a trebuchet can kill a demon. I doubt I'll get another opportunity to find out."

"Not," Ratface sighed. "Though I'd like to live to collect my pension, so let's not get any heroic ideas."

The goblet in Hune's hands looked like a small toy compared to the size of her fingers – earlier we'd all pretended not to notice when she'd partially crushed it by accident.

"This is foolish," the ogre commander complained, then clenched a fist. There was the sound of metal crumpling like cheap parchment and wine dripped through her closed fist. "Not, ancestors forgive me. I was not raised to go meekly."

I cast a look at Hakram, who shrugged.

"Do you even have to ask?"

That left two. Juniper's face had gone pale green with anger, eyes burning. Aisha had slipped back into the court mask she'd no doubt been taught as a child, expressionless save for a polite smile.

"We set a pace before moving out," the legate said. "Anybody who can't keep up gets left behind."

This was, I knew, as far down as I'd be able to bend her neck. I could make it an order, of course. Respect for the chain of command was so deeply ingrained in Juniper that she'd follow an order she thoroughly despised without argument. *But if I do that, I cross a line I can't uncross. What little trust we have between us will be gone, and it'll never come back.*

"Agreed," I conceded.

Masego cleared his throat. "Delightful little bit of drama, ladies and gentlemen, good show all around. Now if we could get back to the matter at hand?"

"Highest priority is to get the locals ready to leave as fast as possible," I said. "Kilian's still overseeing the garrison, she needs to be brought up to speed."

"We have a higher priority than that," Juniper replied. "Our worst wounded are still half a day's march away from the city, Foundling."

Shit. I'd totally forgotten about that. They'd been too slow to keep up when we'd marched on Marchford, so they'd been allowed to trail slightly behind with our extra supplies.

"Apprentice, how likely are they to be targeted?" I asked.

"Normally I'd say the odds are low," Masego grimaced. "But stronger corruption demons can affect the creational laws of time and space – there could be a force headed there as we speak."

"Infantry wouldn't move fast enough," Ratface mused. "But the cataphracts might."

I clenched my fingers, then slowly unclenched them.

"Hune, I'm taking one of your cohorts to back them up on the way here," I announced. "The rest of you need to get this evacuation moving."

"There'll be riots," Aisha said. "And without your... skills in defusing those, we have fewer options to deal with them."

I closed my eyes.

"Marchford is under martial law," I finally replied. "Do what you have to."

—

The awareness that a fortnight ago I would have used Nilin's cohort for this was like a throbbing wound in the back of my mind. Tribune Galia was a solid officer, an orc nearly as tall as Hakram with skin a shade of green so dark it bordered on black, but she was not my friend. She'd not been with me since Rat Company, hadn't followed me through thick and thin in the war games. I kept those thoughts away from my face as well as I could while she hurried the cohort down the road. For once I'd bothered to bring Zombie along to a possible fight, riding ahead of the column to serve as the scouting line we were lacking. We'd already been marching for over a bell without any signs of the wounded, but we should be coming across them any moment now. The night was dark and the now blood-red moon cast treacherous shadows everywhere, so I rather wished I'd thought to bring goblins along – I was the only person in the cohort with any real night vision to speak of. I'd ordered for us to go without torches as not to warn the enemy we were coming.

Skilfully guiding Zombie through the trees that bordered both sides of the road, I reined him in when I finally caught a flicker of movement in the distance. Breathing in, I focused and sharpened my Name vision to get a better look. *And there you are.* About two hundred legionaries with still-limited mobility, most on foot but some on the oxen carts that also carried our additional stacks of weapons and foodstuffs. They seemed to be ploughing along at a good pace, no doubt spurred forward by the fact that even the sky had apparently gotten licked by the Hells. I turned Zombie around and galloped back to the cohort, skimming our moving lines and slowing when I found the tribune. Captain

Ubaïd, in command of her second company, was engaged in quiet conversation with her. They both quieted when I stopped by them.

"Found our wounded," I announced bluntly. "They're just up ahead, they don't seem to have run into anyone."

"Still no sign of the enemy then, Lady Squire?" Galia asked.

"Apprentice said it was only a possibility," I noted. "Could be the demon's not strong enough to be a threat so quickly."

Just the word for what we'd be facing was enough to have both battle-hardened officers flinch. For all that Tyrants had not been above calling up those creatures in the past, they were not counted as friends by any of the Praesi.

"We're not home safe yet, anyway," I grunted, diplomatically ignoring their reaction. "Until we're back in Marchford no one should let their guard down."

"Oh, I don't think anyone will be closing their eyes on the job tonight," Ubaïd murmured. "Not with that thing out there."

"Should I sound a horn in warning of our approach, my lady?" Galia said.

I shook my head. "Not yet."

I trusted Masego, strange as that was to say. Maybe not to carry all my secrets, but he had an obsession with being exactly correct that predisposed him against lying. He wouldn't have brought up the possibility if he hadn't genuinely thought I should be prepared to deal with it. With a polite nod to the officers I rode ahead of the column again. I took Zombie into the woods more out of habit than any real need, moving forward at a trot. Eventually I pulled my mount to a stop, simply watching my forces coming closer together. I'd never been particularly fond of forests – it was the city girl in me, I imagined – a taste ever reinforced by the horror tales about the things that lurked in the Waning Woods and the Greywood. The red tinge cast by the moon over everything turned the mess of trunks and overgrown roots into a hellish labyrinth it would be easy to get lost into. A firefly passed in front of me, then circled around and came to rest on my outstretched hand. Huh. Lucky omen, that. Fireflies were rare in this part of Callow. The insect flew up the nearest tree and I followed it with my eyes until it came to rest on a branch.

Where a creature sat, looking down at me.

It was the size of a man, with large dark eyes and long legs ending in feet pointing both ways that were adorned with claws looking like iron hooks. It bared iron teeth at me, rustling its

red-brown fur as it jumped. My sword cleared its scabbard before I even thought of it and I ducked under, blade striking at its body as it flew over me.

"AMBUSH!" I screamed, but I was too late.

Horns sounded from both my cohort and where the wounded were. I'd sliced the creature, I saw, but there was no blood on my blade. *Devil.*

"Little girl," the hooked thing said in Mtethwa, putting its human-like palms up. "I mean no harm."

"I do," I replied, swinging for its eyes.

It scampered away up a tree before I could touch it, chittering something in the Dark Tongue. The firefly gently landed on Zombie's neck, and before I could so much as blink it expanded into a human shape with a wet squelch of forming flesh. A pale-skinned humanoid without eyes leered at me, baring rust-coloured fangs. My pommel struck it in the mouth, breaking teeth as it let out a cackle like a hyena's. More shapes were clustering in the trees.

"Well," I said. "This could be going better."

Chapter 23: Defeat

"Tyrants do not lose. We face temporary setbacks."

– Dread Empress Maledicta II

Staying in the woods was a good way to head for premature retirement, so I spurred Zombie on to get us the Hells out of there.

"This could have been a pleasant evening, you know," I complained out loud. "Sure the blood-coloured moon is a bit of a mood killer, but when's the last time I just went for a ride?"

"Little girl," another hooked thing spoke from the trees, "why do you-"

Without missing a beat, I raised my sword in its direction and allowed my Name to coalesce in a spear of shadows – the projectile flew faster than the eye could follow, tearing a smoking hole through the devil's head. Its iron claws kept it on the branch, but it stopped moving. *No blood but they can still die. That's a start.* My mount wove around the trunks and branches with preternatural ability, though not because of any great riding abilities on my part. Controlling Zombie became easier with every passing month, and by now was merely took an afterthought: most of my attention was on our surroundings. And a

good thing it was, too. A I took a turn a long snake-like thing dropped from above and barred my path. *Oh Gods. No, not a snake.* I'd seen centipedes before, but this one was large as a small horse and covered in small pincers all over its length. They were constantly moving and on its back I could see they formed patterns like human faces screaming and weeping. I could almost make out what they said, but – I stopped myself right there.

"Catherine, we *don't* stare too long at the eldritch abomination that makes a mockery of all that is good and decent," I reminded myself, guiding Zombie to jump over it.

The devil's front reared up, opening up into a jaw lined with four weeping thorns that snapped at my horse's tail. Yeah, I wasn't sticking around to see anymore of that. On another note, I had a feeling the spark of guilt I'd used to get when stepping on centipedes was gone permanently.

"Little girl," one of the devils called out in a sing-song voice that sent a shiver up my spine.

"I'm seventeen, you prick," I yelled back, because I had never quite managed to learn when to shut up.

I ducked under a branch and finally emerged into the open, where my usual run of luck was continuing: my cohort was getting mauled by what must have been upwards of twenty devils. It was hard to tell in the dark, since the whole formation had fallen into chaos. I picked out a few gaping holes in the ground that likely meant the things had burrowed under my legionaries when setting up their ambush. *Merciless Gods, I thought devils were supposed to be mindless. How long have those been around, to start thinking ahead this much?* Didn't matter, in the end. I was still going to have to clean up the mess before retreating. Speaking of messes, I cast a look west and winced. My wounded were getting torn apart, there were no two ways about it. They'd managed to get weapons out, at least, but they were in no shape to handle a pair of devils, never mind the thirty or so they seemed to be dealing with. A large silhouette the size of a supply wagon was rampaging around, goring men with a pair of curved horns sprouting off its head with unsettling agility. A heartbeat passed as I considered my options.

Could I get my cohort in order quick enough to come to their rescue? Screams were filling the night, both my legionaries' and the creatures'. Every moment I spent hesitating, my soldiers were dying. I knew I should at least make the attempt, but In the back of my mind eerie green eyes looked back at me. *The only clean victories are the ones in the stories, Catherine.* I could see no way to turn this into a victory, but the point still stood. I couldn't save everyone. I couldn't even save most.

"Gods forgive me," I whispered as Zombie galloped for the cohort.

Captain Ubaid was the first officer I found, screaming at the top of his lungs so his orders could be overheard over the ruckus. His company was trying to form a square but one of the monsters had burst out of the ground in the middle of their position. It looked almost like a man covered in filthy rags, but a jackal's head sprouted from the back of its head and from the looks of it its grip was strong enough to pull apart steel and crush bones. Zombie scattered a handful of my own men as he picked up speed and headed straight for the devil. I could have taken us a little to the side to swing my sword as we passed, but arming swords were not designed to be used from horseback – instead my mount reared up and a pair of hooves slammed into the devil's back, battering it down. The thing apparently did not have bones, but there was a sound like a door hinge breaking. I reached for my Name before it could get up, a blade of darkness extending from the tip to sever the creature's neck. It flopped uselessly on the ground, perhaps not dead but no longer able to fight.

"Hack that into smaller pieces," I ordered the closest legionaries, who were looking at me with something like awe.

"Lady Squire," Ubaid called out, pushing through the ranks. "We must-"

"Get your men into tighter lines, captain," I interrupted, tone flat. "We're pushing forward to take the pressure off Tribune Galia."

"She's dead, ma'am," Ubaid replied. "Some sort of giant snake creature burst out of the ground and swallowed her whole."

I cursed in Taghrebi. "The other captain?"

"Firefly landed on his eye, burst through the skull," a legionary with lieutenant's stripes contributed, bleeding from her cheek.

My fingers clenched. We were going through officers faster than godsdamned rations, these days.

"Ubaid, consider yourself a tribune for all intents and purposes," I said. "We're still moving forward. I'm not leaving half the cohort behind when we retreat."

It was a sign of how badly we were getting hurt that not a single one of them suggested we try to extract the wounded. The man nodded, exhaustion showing for a moment before the Legion discipline kicked in and his face turned into a professional mask. I dismounted and rolled my shoulder, trying to get it to pop so it'd stop aching under the plate. I glanced at the lieutenant who'd talked earlier, frowning as I recognized the features under the blood and steel.

"Kamilah," I said. "Is that you?"

"Ma'am," she replied with a wan smile. "I'd say it's a pleasure to see you again, but under the circumstances..."

She'd been a sergeant in Rat Company. For a moment that almost made me reconsider what I was about to order, the sight of Nilin's corpse wreathed in green coming up to haunt me. Calmly, I grabbed that burst of sentimentality by its metaphorical neck and snapped it. *Sentiment is no longer a luxury I can afford.*

"How's your line, Lieutenant?" I asked.

"Down two men, Lady Callow," she replied. "But we're still in fighting shape."

I almost smiled at the reminder of the name I'd assumed during my College days, tightening the strap holding my heater shield to my arm.

"Then get your men ready, Lieutenant," I said. "We're going hunting."

—

For my cohort to be in a position to retreat, I needed two things.

The first was for our formation to be free of enemies inside its confines. That much I knew I could achieve. The second thing was a little trickier: I needed to finish this part of the fight before the devils in the woods and the ones killing my wounded moved on us. That was the reason was why I was currently wrestling down one of the two-faced monsters as Kamilah's legionaries surrounded it. Good goblin steel slid in the thing's sides but it only struggled harder against my grip. Its fingers ripped into my plate, scoring long gouges on the surface. I cursed and rammed my helmet into the teeth of the jackal face. It reared back with a howl and the lieutenant herself hacked into the bared neck with her sword, putting it down for good. I forced myself up. The second company that had made up Tribune Galia's cohort was scattered in small pockets, fighting whatever devil had seen fit to prey on them. Numbers were starting to tell now that my legionaries had recovered from the surprise, but we weren't out of the proverbial woods yet. Ubaid was advancing his company as a three-man thick shield wall, enveloping individual devils in a circle of steel to overwhelm them – but there were outliers that were too strong for him to deal with.

That was where I came in.

From where I stood, I could see two of the hook-bearing devils from the woods and one of the pale eyeless ones. Those I let go, leaving them to Ubaid. The firefly shapeshifters weren't too troublesome as long as they were in that humanlike shape, and

after the second time the hooked ones had used the shields of my legionaries as a jumping point to tear out the throat of the man behind they'd adjusted their tactics accordingly. The real problems were the unique ones, like the large skinless ape who'd just caved in the head of a legionary a little to my left.

"Skinless," I called out. "Left."

Kamilah's line fell in behind me without a word, shields up and swords in the middle line. We moved forward at a brisk pace but the devil noticed us before before we could get too close. Leering in a way that displayed its oversized human teeth, it picked up the corpse of the legionary it had killed and tossed it at me like a rag doll. I barely had the time to wish it had killed a human instead of an orc before the body hit my shield like the load of a trebuchet. Gritting my teeth, I anchored my feet on the ground but the impact was so ludicrously strong it pushed me back a dozen paces, my armoured feet dragging lines into the ground. The legionary right behind me was thrown to the ground when we impacted, but I wasted no time looking back: snarling, I charged forward. Unsurprisingly, whatever ungodly place had given birth to devil had decided that just a pile of ape-shaped muscles and bones wasn't a horrifying enough appearance. Under the red flesh I could see wriggling maggots, some falling to the ground and crawling towards corpses as the devil ran in my direction. Its fist was the size of my head, but there was no subtlety to its attack: I saw the strike coming and ducked under the swing, closing the distance. My sword sliced up through its belly, tearing muscles and spilling maggots all over my shield. The monster barely even noticed, delivering a kick to my abdomen that knocked the wind out of me and sent me tumbling to the ground.

"Gods Below and Everburning," I snarled, pushing myself back up. "Summoning you shits should be illegal."

"I hear that, ma'am," one of Kamilah's legionaries muttered.

The rest of the line spread into a loose circle around the ape and I ignored the ache in my legs as I returned to the fray. I wouldn't kill this one by going for vital spots, that much had become abundantly clear. I'd have to cripple it enough that the legionaries could help me finish it off. The devil stepped forward lazily, the wound I'd inflicted it now filled with writhing worms. I loosened the straps on my shield and shook it off my arm, rolling my shoulder. Blocking would be pointless here, I'd have to dodge.

"Come on, big guy," I grunted. "Let's have another go."

"Squire," the ape replied in a scared child's voice. "Please, Squire. It hurts, it hurts *so much*."

"I've walked the Hall of Screams," I spoke calmly, keeping the horror I felt off my face. Was it – was there actually a child in there, under all the maggots? "You're going to need to do better than that, if you want me to flinch."

It struck without warning, but I'd not dropped my guard. A half-step put me just out of the punch's path and my sword came down just under its shoulder with all the strength I could muster, cutting through flesh until it hit the bone. I felt the humerus break, but I couldn't go any further. Maggots started crawling up my blade and hastily whipped it out, barely dodging out of the way when the ape tried to cave in my torso with its foot.

"Why won't it *stop*," the devil screamed, the child's voice going shrill. "Mother, where are you? Why is it so dark?"

The ape reached for the wrist of its damaged arm and ripped the entire thing out of its socket, the voice of the child screaming in pain as it swung the appendage at me like a mace. I took a deep breath and Creation slowed, all distractions fading away as my Name pulsed against my ears. I'd been wary of its power once, but compared to what stood in front of me? Gods, even the worst my Role could make was clear water compared to that filth. I steadied my footing and brought my blade down on the arm. I sliced clean through it, spilling worms as the lower half of the appendage flew in the distance and the rest passed me. Feeling my focus already beginning to wane, I ran forward. The ape had dropped its makeshift weapon and tried to grab me but I spun around the fingers, angling my body downwards and my sword to the side as I slid between its feet. The blade cut through the flesh of its lower leg, stopping only when it hit the bone: I ground my teeth in effort and hacked again, this time going all the way through. The devil toppled forward with crazed laughter, grasping at my legionaries who'd cautiously edged away from it. The moment after, as I crawled away from the remains of the leg that was were already spewing maggots like a fountain, Kamilah's line fell on the downed devil like a pack of wolves.

Methodically they chopped away the limbs, the lieutenant herself dodging an attempt from the beast to bite through her arm before ramming her sword in its empty eye socket. By the time I'd gotten back on my feet, all that was left was a pile of wriggling flesh incapable of moving.

"You're getting rather good at this," I told Kamilah, trying to keep my mind away from the very real possibility that there was still an innocent child's soul kept prisoner in the devil's remains.

"Practice makes perfect," the woman replied, serenely bringing her boot down to squash a worm that had gotten too close.

I couldn't help a smile. That little sentence was the essence of the Legions, wasn't it? The ironclad belief that as long as they remembered their training and kept the shield wall steady there wasn't a force in Creation – or beyond – they could not beat. What did it matter, if they were facing angels or devils? A crossbow shot every twenty heartbeats and good goblin steel would see them through it. There was, I reflected, something very Callowan about that. The again perhaps that shouldn't have surprised me. How had my teacher put it, if Warlock was to be believed? *When trying to understand someone, look at their enemies.* The Legions had been shaped by Callow as much as Callow had been shaped by the Legions. Shaking away the musing, I focused on the there and then. Now was not the time to get lost in thought. As far as I could see, the handful of remaining devils were fleeing the field. Yet another thing they should not be clever enough to do. Ubaid's company had swelled with almost all the survivors from the other one: this was, I recognized, as many as I'd be able to salvage from this fiasco. I forced myself to look west. My heart clenched at the sight of the last of my wounded being swarmed over by devils, but I knew how forcing that engagement would go.

"We're done here," I told Lieutenant Kamilah. "We're marching back to Marchford, as fast as we can manage. Send word to Cap-Tribune Ubaid," I corrected myself.

"Thanks the Gods," my old follower from Rat Company breathed out in relief. "I'll go myself, ma'am. We can't leave soon enough for my taste."

She clapped her sergeant on the shoulder and made it three feet before the ground burst out under her and enormous jaws snapped shut around her body. The snake's head was the size of a barn, but while its features might have been reptilian there was not a scale in sight. *Flesh*, I realized. It was made of flesh. A hundred thousand faces sown together in a patchwork of features that still moved. The devil turned its eerie cat eyes at me, then noisily crushed Kamilah inside its mouth. I felt a red haze descend on me. I did not recall bringing up my arm, but I snarled and shadows formed into something that was more a ballista bolt than a spear, flickering into movement faster than even my Name-sight could grasp. It hit the snake just under the jaw, and the shadows splashed harmlessly against the skin. The devil swallowed, then opened its gaping maw.

"Was she precious to you?" it asked, but the voice did not come from the mouth. The faces all over its skin were speaking in unison, a hundred men and women. "She was; I can see it from your anger. That's fine. You might still save her if you're fast enough. It takes a while before they become part of me."

I found, to my surprise, that the rage taking hold of my bones was so deep it was stilling my tongue. I stepped forward, sword in hand, but the devil laughed.

"Come and play, Named," it invited me, slithering back into the hole it had torn through the ground.

I took hold of my rage. I would not make decisions angry. Anger made you sloppy, clouded your judgement. This once, though, my burning desire to brutally murder that creature coincided with what needed to be done. I had no idea how quick it could move underground, but there was no way I could afford to let it harass us on the way back to Marchford.

"Sergeant, begin the retreat," I ordered, voice deceptively even.

The orc saluted, then hesitated.

"Will... will you be coming with us, Lady Squire?" he asked.

I spun my blade in a loose circle, loosening my wrist.

"I'll be following shortly," I replied, and jumped into the hole.

Immediately I regretted that decision when the serpent's head burst out of the hole and rose into the air, faces cackling. I only barely managed to catch the open mouth one of of them with my free hand as we kept getting higher. It tried to chomp down, but teeth were pointless against good plate.

"Got you," the nearest face crowed as the snake continued rising in the air.

Sixty feet at least before it stopped, and there must have been at least that much underground to support it.

"Can you fly, little Named?" the face asked mockingly.

Grunting in effort, I rammed my sword into the open mouth and used the pommel as a handhold. I had enough of a grip I could hug my body closer and slip my feet into another mouth and an eye socket – I had to kick until the eye fell off, but eventually I made enough space.

"And down we go," a woman's face announced above me.

To my horror, the devil tipped back and let itself fall. The wind howled around me and the ground got closer with every heartbeat as I desperately tried to scale the side so I wouldn't be stuck between the massive weight and the floor. I was only half successful: earth sprayed and corpses flew, masking the sound of my left arm and leg breaking. I bit my lip until it bled to force down the primal scream of pain that almost escaped me. The snake shook itself, then slowly rose again.

"That must have hurt," the woman's face mused.

"One arm and one leg left," an old man snickered. "How long can you hold on?"

Under me I could see my cohort beginning to panic, though the officers were doing their best to keep them moving. The devil begun to waddle back and forth like a grotesque pendulum, my body shaking with it. Shit. My arm and leg were – I blinked, then rasped out a laugh. *As good as dead*. Gods, I really needed to add some tricks to my arsenal did not rely on me being halfway into the grave. My Name howled in approval, spinning threads around the useless limbs. With the crack of multiple fractures worsening, I forced my broken arm to reach up and force its way into another face's mouth.

"Pointless," a puppet from around my knee mocked me.

I hoisted myself up, kicking through its teeth to use its mouth as a foothold. Inch by inch, I started making my way up to the head. It tried to shake me off, shouting insults all the while, but the threads held. Tightened, but did not snap. The devil screamed and let itself fall forward, counting on the momentum to flip me off its head. I rammed my sword through the nostril of another face at an angle to give me a counterpoint, feeling the muscles in both my arms tear as I pushed myself in the opposite direction. Immediately it tried to push the other way to use it against me, but something that size could not move fast enough – I'd already found other handholds by then. The higher I got the more it panicked, shaking and screaming imprecations at me.

"You can't kill me," it screamed when I finally hoisted myself over the ridge of the head. "I am hunger incarnate, I-"

"Talk too much," I finished coldly, shoving my free hand in the mouth.

The shadows formed into a spear and kept growing as I tapped into the furthest depths of my Name and kept feeding into it, growing and growing until I could no longer hold the power. With bared teeth I released it, and felt it burrow inside deep inside the devil's head. The mouth closed over my forearm like a bear trap, teeth shattering against steel, and every single face went silent. Slowly it dipped forward and fell, crashing against the ground with a thunderous roar. I slipped off the side of it and landed on my bad leg with a hoarse cry, guiding Zombie to me with a thought. I leaned on my mount from my good side and hoisted myself up with only two suppressed yells of horrible pain, which was a victory of sorts. I only then noticed I'd landed less than a dozen feet away from my cohort, every single legionary of which was looking at me in utter silence.

"I don't remember telling you to stop retreating," I croaked out, sheathing my sword.

Chapter 24: Archer

"My mother used to tell me it gets worse before it gets better, but I've found it's usually the other way around."

– Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

"Two bells," Hakram complained. "I leave you alone for *two bells* and you get into a fistfight with a giant devil snake."

"In my defence," I croaked. "It started it."

Countess Elizabeth's former solar had once again been commandeered for my purposes, though this time I was seated mostly because I was unable to stand. I'd been half-tempted to ride into the room on Zombie but had ultimately allowed Adjutant to prop me up on my way here. The trouser leg over my broken bone had been cut off, the same for the sleeve on my bad arm. Hakram had been visibly uncomfortable at the hint of my smallclothes that could be seen on my upper thigh, much to my amusement. For someone who supposedly slept around so much he could be rather prudish. Apprentice felt up the muscles on my leg a little too hard and I cursed him out loudly.

"Why do you always involve goats when you insult someone's ancestry?" the Soninke mused, and I had to resist the urge to kick him in the chin.

Oh it would have hurt like a bitch, but feeling his chin give in would have been so very satisfying. The mage frowned, not having noticed any of the debate raging through my mind.

"Catherine, did you use necromancy on yourself?" he asked.

I cleared my throat. "I've been known to dabble."

"That shouldn't be possible," he noted. "While broken, the limb wasn't technically *dead*. That does explain, however, why the inside of half your limbs is in the early stages of necrosis."

"That sounds bad," I said. "Hakram, doesn't that sound bad?"

"I'm still at the part of this story where you punched a snake the size of a carrack in the head and it *died*," Adjutant replied.

"It mouthed off," I defended myself.

"Cat, if you punch everyone who mouths off to you we'll be down half our officer corps," the tall orc sighed.

"The surviving half would be very polite, though," Apprentice commented drily.

I wasn't sure whether it was having to men I rather liked fussing over me or because the banter was a reassuringly familiar feeling, but sitting here in relative safety the fresh horror of the battlefield I'd barely escaped was starting to fade. Knowing Hakram, he'd probably done the latter on purpose.

"So what's the damage, doc?" I asked Masego.

"I can fix most of this, but I'm not a priest," the mage said a green halo wreathing his hand as he sunk his magic into my leg. "Broken bones will take a least three days to stop being brittle. I've already begun reversing the necrosis, but if you move the limbs too much the tissue won't heal."

"Not sure priestly healing would work on me at this point," I said. "Took the wrong career path for that."

"Squire isn't a fundamentally villainous Name," Apprentice replied. "It's also the transitional Name leading into being the White Knight."

"Necromancy's a bit of a hint that this isn't heading into White Knight territory," Hakram snorted.

Masego scoffed.

"There's nothing inherently villainous about necromancy, Adjutant," he spoke peevishly. "Or any kind of magic, for that matter. Cultural taboos are just that."

"I've reached deep into my Name, Masego," I murmured. "It's not a pleasant thing."

The chubby mage smiled thinly. "Spoken like someone who has never seen the aftermath of an angelic intervention. Angels are just as dangerous to mortals as devils, Catherine. Both are driven by absolutes. You only need to look at your nemesis' sword to know that."

I frowned. "That thing is related to angels?"

"A shard of one, if I'm not mistaken," the dark-skinned man said.

"I've seen it slice into *stone*," I replied dubiously.

"To embrace contrition is to feel the bite of regret," he quoted. "The Hashmallim are not known for subtlety, or their understanding of metaphor."

I raised an eyebrow. That was verbatim from the Book of All Things, and not one of the better-known passages either.

"The only other Praesi I've ever heard speak the Book is Kilian, and she's Duni," I said.

The Green Stretch had been through regular infusions of Callowan blood and culture from periods where Imperial power had waned and the Kingdom's waxed, not to mention the era where most of Praes has been separated into crusader states.

"Father insisted I familiarize myself with the dominant theological movement on the continent," the mage shrugged. "Dreadfully tedious stuff, by large, though its take on villainy was most amusing."

"Organized religion," Hakram scorned. "And you call us strange. Why would you ever want a middleman between yourself and the Gods? They're bound to screw you over."

"To be honest, Masego probably knows more about the theology of it than I do," I admitted. "I skipped services as often as I could get away with."

"Is this the part where we pretend to be surprised?" Apprentice asked, the green glow around his hand winking out.

He patted my bare leg, eyeing me for any sign of pain. When I showed no reaction he gave a satisfied nod.

"We're done for now," he said. "I'll want to check on that necrosis in the morning, though."

"Probably a good idea," I agreed. "You should probably explain to me what that is when you do."

I could see in his eyes that he knew I was yanking his chain, prompting a grin on my part, but he was already puffing up like an angry pedantic peacock when someone rapped their knuckles against the door.

"Come in," I called out.

Juniper came into the room, Aisha and Nauk trailing close behind.

"Squire," my legate grunted. "You look like shit."

"If you keep sweet talking me like this, Kilian will get jealous," I replied.

"Gods forbid," the Hellhound spoke, rolling her eyes.

Nauk looked like he was about to burst, so I gestured vaguely in his direction.

"Out with it," I ordered.

"Is it true you punched a giant snake until it died?" he asked eagerly.

"That's... relatively true?" I admitted.

"Hah," the large orc exclaimed, and Aisha cursed.

The Taghreb girl flipped Nauk a golden aurelius that the orc caught with a smug, sharp-toothed grin.

"Told you it was true. Remember when she punched out that ogre?" the commander reminded his colleague.

"Ogres aren't the size of a small fortress," the staff tribune muttered.

For a moment I debated stating, once again, that I'd never punched out an ogre. Or castrated one, for that matter, no matter what filthy lies Robber kept spreading. With a sigh I let it go: there was no killing the tale, at this point.

"I have the casualty reports, if you're in a state to hear them," Juniper broke in, silencing our common minions with a glare.

The shadow of a smile that had been stretching my lips disappeared at the words.

"How bad was it?" I asked soberly.

"No survivors from our wounded, as you already know," the grim-faced legate said. "Out of the cohort you took we've got forty dead."

That put our final numbers at a little above one thousand and one hundred. Less than one thousand in fighting shape.

"We can't afford to keep taking fatalities like this," I said.

"We weren't significantly weakened by the battle," Aisha noted. "Most of the dead were too wounded to be able to fight."

"Defeat, Aisha," I grunted. "Weakened by the defeat. Call it what it was."

She lowered her head in concession.

"No point in wallowing either, Squire," the Hellhound said. "I've had reports on the number of the devils, but I want your take. How many did you see?"

"My guess is around a hundred total," I said. "We killed maybe twenty, likely less."

"Devils aren't technically killed, just dispersed beyond coherence. And necrosis is when flesh begins to die because of internal humours," Masego burst out suddenly.

I raised an eyebrow. "Yes, we all knew that second one. Why mention it?" I asked earnestly, as if I'd had no idea what prompted the outburst.

"I hate you so much right now," he muttered.

Still, that had been interesting. Had he literally not been able to help himself? Warlock's son did have a tendency to want to be exact in all things, but did it really run this deep? *Aspect-driven*, I realized with a start. There must have been something about his Name that pushed him to be excruciatingly precise. That was a dangerous weakness, the kind of exploitable flaw that made you reveal your master plan because the hero bantered a little too close to home. There were more unfortunate implications, though. Was I similarly affected by my Role? I'd wondered, once or twice, whether I'd gotten Struggle because I so often got in over my head – or whether it was the other way around. *Does my Name push me to get into trouble?*

"Anyhow, there will have been one hundred devils to start with," Apprentice continued. "One hundred is a magically significant number, and "that one Empress" was known to field companies of them."

"Would have been useful to know that beforehand," Juniper growled.

The mage huffed.

"I would have mentioned it if I'd known it was relevant," he replied. "I already told you most records from back then were destroyed."

I raised a hand.

"We know now, that's what matters," I intervened. "And it changes things."

"Evacuation is no longer a viable plan," Juniper agreed. "Not even for the Fifteenth alone. You don't fight devils on ground they picked."

"How defensible is the city?" I asked.

"We have no walls," Aisha said flatly. "And even if we did, we wouldn't have the numbers to cover everywhere we need."

"One of those I can fix," the Hellhound spoke calmly. "Marchford is built in stone, thankfully. Pickler is currently collapsing the outer ring of houses. I've drafted from all companies for

additional manpower. We should have at least a rudimentary fortification before the city is hit."

I nodded in approval, then hesitated. "The people owning those houses can't have been particularly pleased," I mentioned.

"We've had a riot," my legate acknowledged. "Adjutant dispersed the crowd before it turned too bad."

I cast a surprised look at Hakram, who shrugged.

"I pointed out they could either let us tear down the houses or share them with a demon," he informed me. "Funny how that word sobers up even angry young men. I've also committed the Fifteenth to rebuilding them when the battle is done."

"That won't work twice, Deadhand. City's a pot about to boil over," Nauk gravelled. "As soon as the light of day comes and word spreads there'll be more rioting, mark my words."

I passed a tired hand through my hair.

"Bulk up our patrols, and forbid legionaries to wander off alone," I ordered. "If the city rises, this is over. We can't allow that to happen."

"They're not making protecting their ungrateful hides very easy," Aisha spoke disdainfully.

"They're panicking," I retorted sharply. "Civilians do that."

There was a pregnant pause in the room.

"I didn't mean it as a comment on Callowans in general," the Taghreb said carefully. "My apologies if offence was taken, Lady Squire."

I felt a spark of guilt at the wariness on her face. I already knew Aisha wasn't the kind of Praesi aristocrat that thought of my people like cattle. She was, if anything, roughly egalitarian in her distrust of individuals of every background. I gestured half-heartedly at her.

"It's been a long night," I apologized. "My temper is finding targets unworthy of it."

"Think no more of it, my lady," the brown-skinned girl replied politely.

"Manpower's going to be an issue," Hakram broke in, thankfully changing the subject.

"More than you think," I grimaced. "Some of the devils can take the shape of a firefly, and others can dig underground. We can't

leave the city itself undefended and look only after the outer parts."

Masego started.

"Fireflies?" he repeated. "*Shit.*"

I frowned. "They're actually the easiest breed to deal with."

"For you, sure," he said. "You're not what they're born for. They're mage-takers."

"I have a feeling," Juniper gravelled, "that I'm not going to like what follows."

"They bury in the back of a mage's neck and take over the body," Apprentice explained. "The practitioner's ability to use magic is significantly improved, so there's rituals where diabolists bind them to themselves, but if we're not the ones who summoned them..."

"Well, let's take checking all our mages to the top of our priority list," I said. "And get the word out to the civilians – there aren't as many mages born in Callow as in the Wasteland, but there's bound to be a few left in a city this size."

"Here's a thought," Nauk said. "Conscript those. We need the firepower and we're asking them to fight for their own bloody home."

"I'd conscript everyone in fighting shape in the city, if I could," Juniper said. "But it's pointless if we don't have weapons for them to use. Our stocks don't have that many extra supplies, and most of those were with our wounded."

I blinked. Sometimes I forgot they hadn't been born here, hadn't been raised to the culture. That they didn't really understand the people the Empire was ruling over.

"This is *Callow*," I told them. "Half the houses in the city will have swords and spears stashed under the floorboard or hidden away in the attic."

Surprised faces all around, with quite a bit of confusion.

"The Royal Guard was never as large as the Legions, even at its peak," I reminded them. "Whenever Procer came through the Vale, whenever Emperors marched on Summerholm, the bulk of the Kingdom's host was always volunteers. Families keep arms and pass them from generation to generation."

I half-smiled, drawing on those nights I'd spent serving drinks in Laure.

"*So pick up your sword, boy*

Here they come again

And down here in the mud,

It's us who holds the line," I sang, the refrain of a song as old as the Kingdom.

"I've heard that tune before," Hakram said.

"Here They Come Again," I told him. "It was never officially banned but Imperial authorities frown on people singing it. A little too rebellious for the Tower's tastes, I imagine."

"Having weapons is one thing," Juniper grunted. "Do they know how to use them?"

"I'm less optimistic about that," I admitted. "The men and women with martial training, however slight, will have been taken with the Countess when she left for Vale."

"Disorganized rabble can hold a chokepoint, given sufficient motivation," Aisha spoke flatly. "I imagine not wanting their homes become a demon-infested wasteland might do the trick in that regard."

Hakram cleared his throat.

"That's not something that can be assessed from this room, so arguing over the subject is pointless," he reminded everyone. "I wouldn't discount the possibility that Countess Marchford left with most of those weapons, either."

Damn, I hadn't thought of that. The aristocrat was one of the richest women in Callow, but having too many arms and armour forged at once would have rung alarms with the Empire. It wasn't even worth considering that Black *didn't* have agents embed in every major blacksmithing guild in the country.

"I'll get started on the organization for all this, then," Juniper sighed.

"I'll put a pot of tea on the fire," Aisha told her, almost getting a smile out of my grim-faced legate.

They both looked at me and I nodded my dismissal, already discussing logistics as they left the room. Nauk lingered a little longer.

"Kinda wished you'd brought me along for that last fight, boss," he gravelled.

"Hells, so do I," I muttered. "If I'd had a pair of cohorts instead of the one we would have swept through the bastards and gotten our people out."

"We'll get a second round soon enough," the large orc conceded, then paused to choose his words.

That was unusual enough he got my full attention immediately.

"When the Silver Spears come back, after they've had a nice moonlit stroll with the demon... I'd like for my kabili to be the one facing them."

"We won't know where they attack for sure," I frowned.

"Between you and the Hellhound, I'm sure a good guess will be made," he grunted.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. His reasons were obvious enough, though I didn't like them. A commander focused on getting payback instead of his actual tactical objectives might make mistakes. On the other hand, a commander with strong personal motivation to carry a fight might perform better than one less... driven.

"Will you lose your shit, if I put you in front of them?" I asked bluntly.

Nauk's brutish face hardened, though not out of anger at me. He knew the question was not undeserved, and that him going into the Red Rage in the middle of a battle would fuck up his kabili's entire chain of command.

"I swear to you I will not," he gravelled. "On my father's blood, I make that oath. May my Clan bury me unmarked if I lie."

Hakram took in a sharp breath, so that wasn't an oath lightly made.

"Done," I finally said.

Selling that to Juniper was going to be a pain and a half, but there was a debt there to settle. He might not see it that way, but I did. The image of our friend wreathed in green flames, looking so damnably peaceful, was not one I would soon forget.

"I knew you'd understand," the large greenskin said. "Rest well, Callow. Tomorrow the real war starts."

And with that ominous bit of talk, he left the three of us behind. Apprentice was the first to stir.

"I'll leave you to your sleep, then," he said.

"Not yet," I replied. "Conscripts and bastard walls aren't going to get us through this, Masego. All of us know that. I need alternatives. How good are you with wards?"

He shrugged. "I could prevent anything from outside of Creation from entering this room, given a bell and the right tools."

"I don't mean for you to ward a room," I replied. "How hard would it be to cover the entire city?"

"That's..." he began, then stopped. "Insane, yes. But not impossible."

"Didn't think you had that kind of juice in you," Hakram noted, sounding a little surprised.

"I don't," the mage replied. "I can't think of a practitioner who would, save perhaps the Dead King. But warding isn't about the power you can provide, it's about what you can accumulate. The whole point of ritualistic magic is that the impetus doesn't come from the caster's personal strength."

I grimaced. This was going to end up being a blood magic thing, wasn't it?

"We're not bleeding people, Apprentice," I stated. "We're not that desperate."

He blinked, then looked offended.

"I'm not a *hack*, Catherine. I don't need sacrifices to brute force my way into higher arcana," he snapped.

"In her defence," Hakram intervened, "when mages start talking about grand designs someone usually ends up strapped to an altar."

"Inferior sorcerers, maybe," Masego scorned, but he looked somewhat mollified. "What I need is a census of the number and location of hearths in the city. All of them."

I was about to ask him why when the window burst into shards of glass. I wasted a precious heartbeat in pure surprise before my training kicked in and I reached for my sword. Which, I immediately remembered, wasn't at my side. It was on the table. By the time I was on my feet, Hakram's blade was out and Apprentice was casting. My hands closed around the handle of my sword and I unsheathed it, biting my lip so I wouldn't let out a scream and the brutal flare of pain that standing suddenly on my broken leg was causing. I'd expected to be looking at a devil, maybe one of those mage-takers come for Masego, but what I was looking at was completely different. Who I was looking at, rather.

A woman, dressed in fine white chainmail going down to her knees in a skirt. Over it she wore a leather coat that covered her arms up to the wrist and came up in a hood. Her lower face was

covered by dark linen, but I could still see her dark ochre skin betraying a bloodline from across the Tyrian Sea and delicate hazelnut eyes. On her back there was a quiver and almost absurdly large longbow strapped, but the weapon she had out was the longknife in her hand. Adjutant, true to form, did not waste time on banter. He took a swing at her without missing a beat but she caught his wrist and twisted it, using his momentum to spin him around and have him face the spell Masego had just let loose. The mage's eyes widened in panic and he barked something in the arcane tongue but there was still a flash of heat and Hakram went flying.

I made to go around the table, not confident in my ability to flip it and power through. The stranger moved towards Apprentice but with a snarl he cast another spell: dark, squid-like flesh grew around his outstretched hand and a flurry of tentacles spread towards the enemy at breakneck speed. The woman snorted and stepped out of the way of most of them, hand snapping out to grab a tentacle and *tugging*. The bespectacled mage fell forward and she lightly jumped over him, ignoring the fact he was already halfway through another incantation. She was coming for me, there were no two ways about it. Assassin? No, the bow would be out of character and if a Calamity had been after my head I would never have seen them coming.

"Who are you?" I asked.

She dashed forward and I grit my teeth. Talking was apparently not an option. I made as if to take a swing at her, but instead brought up my free hand: the spear of shadows coalesced almost instantly and tore in her direction. She sidestepped it with insulting ease, ducked under my sword stroke and socked me in the stomach. Before I was done wheezing in pain and surprise, I felt cool steel resting against my throat as she lightly put up the blade without drawing blood.

"Stop casting that web of lightning, love," she spoke in perfect Lower Miezani. "We're done here."

"Are we?" I said calmly. "I've walked away from having my chest more or less split in half. If you think a slit throat is going to do the trick, I have a surprise for you."

I was, of course, lying through my teeth. But if I'd learned anything about having a Name, it was that if you said anything confidently enough people usually took you seriously.

"Is that so?" the stranger laughed. "Good to know."

She took away the blade from my throat, then sheathed it with flourish.

"I have to say I'm a little disappointed," she continued. "Lady Ranger always speaks very highly of the Black Knight, but if I'd wanted everyone in this room dead you would be."

I started in surprise.

"You're..."

The woman lowered the linen covering her face, offering me a dashing smile.

"Archer," she introduced herself. "As the mandated representative of the Lady of the Lake, I've come to take custody of Hunter."

Chapter 25: Wake

"Only heroes get to have the torch handed to them. Villains must take it from their predecessor's corpse."

-Dread Empress Malicia, First of her Name

Morning Bell wouldn't be sounding for another hour but I was already up and about. I'd long gotten used to seven hour nights and the occasional shorter rest when the Legion's pace demanded it, but not even my Name was enough to tamp down the horrible weariness in my bones. It'd been a while since I'd taken a beating this bad: the only one I could recall that topped it was my first run-in with William. I was in no danger of ever forgetting that fight, or its aftermath. *Pulled levers, and twenty-five Callowans died.* I still felt a flash of anger at the memory, though the executions themselves did not trigger the worst of it. That role was shared between the Lone Swordsman for having meddled with my mind and Black for having Spoken at me. I'd grown to like my teacher more than I'd ever thought possible, but the denial of my free will was not something I would ever just *get over*.

The previous night I'd put off Archer's initial request for the transfer of her colleague to be done immediately, not that she'd fought me very hard on the subject. After having made her initial impression she'd seemed pretty nonchalant about the task she'd been entrusted with. That was rather telling, though I lacked information to draw conclusions from it. The internal politics of Refuge were opaque to me, and everyone else for that matter. The one undeniable fact was that Ranger, formerly of the Calamities, ruled the city. And yet the polity was not aligned in any way with the Empire. It was considered a dwarven protectorate, if anything, though the Kingdom Under disliked making definitive commitments to anyone on the surface. I would have thought a independent city ruled by one of elven blood would have drawn the Golden Bloom's attention, but that did not seem to be the case. Ranger herself might be a half-elf, but she'd not been spared by

the elven lack of interest in anything going on outside their borders.

When I found the Lady of the Lake's envoy, she was seated in a small anteroom close to where we were keeping Hunter, legs crossed as she sat in an armchair and chatted with an interested-looking Apprentice. The bow from last night was nowhere in sight and neither was the coat, leaving her in that pale mail. The dark linen that had covered her lower face had been turned into a makeshift scarf.

"- some of the Unseelie, though they're careful about where they emerge. There are things in the woods not even the Fae would cross lightly," Archer said, sipping at a cup.

I glanced at the contents, noting she was already on hard liquor. *Gods, not even the Praesi like their drink this much.* I'd myself broken my fast with a pot of tea and sweetened porridge I'd found already waiting when I'd emerged from my bed because Hakram was a living treasure.

"There must be several gates, then, spread across the Waning Woods," Masego replied, tone enthusiastic. "Few of them have the ability to actually cross from Arcadia into Creation."

"Squire," the stranger of the two greeted me when I came in.

"Archer," I replied. "Is that aragh in your cup?"

"It's noon in Ashur," she explained easily.

Masego frowned.

"No it isn't."

The ochre-skinned girl sighed.

"It's an expression, love," she told him.

"An inaccurate one," the mage muttered under his breath, much to my amusement.

I cleared my throat.

"He has this thing about being exact," I informed her.

Archer cast a sceptical eye on the mage, then shrugged.

"Us poor bastards raised by Calamities tend to pick up quirks, I've noticed," she commented, then drained her glass. "That aside, I suppose I should get around to checking on Tinkles. Shall we proceed?"

I was about to agree when I processed what she'd just said.

"... Tinkles?" I prompted, smothering a grin.

Archer gestured towards her hair.

"It's all those bells he wears for some reason," she said. "Worse fashion choice than the tattoos, and that's saying something."

I snorted.

"There's nothing wrong with ornamenting your hair," Apprentice intervened defensively, fingering one of trinkets adorning his own dreadlocks.

"There is if you're supposed to go around quiet-like," Archer retorted, rolling her eyes. "Some Hunter he is."

"He's a regular devil with the spear, I'll say that for the man," I conceded.

"No one who studied under the Lady of the Lake would be allowed to leave Refuge if they couldn't take care of themselves," the envoy dismissed. "He's still the weakest of her pupils by far."

After last night's lovely interlude, I had no problem buying that. Even if I'd been a functional cripple for the duration of the scuffle, she'd still handled Hakram and Masego like they were bumbling children.

"Let's get to it, Apprentice," I finally said. "Raising the spell shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"No. It was designed with that in mind. Probably best we get to that sooner than later, anyhow," the mage noted. "I'm not comfortable leaving any magical effects lying around when there's a demon of corruption on the loose. Should they come in contact the effects could be... unpredictable."

Archer's eyes sharpened at the mention of the demon, though she passed no comment. Behind the drinking and the easy grins she didn't miss much, this one. How much of the cheerful façade had been carefully crafted to make us underestimate her, I wondered? We stepped into the room where Hunter was being kept and I dismissed the tenth of guards that kept a weapon on the hero at all times. Normally it would have been a full line, but twenty legionaries just wouldn't fit in the available space. The one-handed hero had been put on a bed, though that was as far as his comfort had been attended to. There were sets of bindings keeping his arms and legs tied together, not that they would have done much good if he were awake and trying to escape. I hadn't needed Black's tutelage to know that keeping heroes imprisoned rarely ended well for a villain.

"He doesn't look in pain," Archer noted.

"No reason he should be," Masego replied.

The dark-skinned mage walked up to the sleeping hero and shoved a hand under the pillow his head was resting on, blindly groping for something. After a moment he took out a small sculpted rock covered in runes, crushing it effortlessly in his hand. I raised an eyebrow. *That wasn't strength, he hasn't the brawn for that.* He blew the dust on Hunter's face and carefully lay a finger between the man's eyes.

"Wake," he ordered.

My brow raised higher. That hadn't been Speaking, not exactly, but there had been power layered behind the word. Nothing happened. Archer cleared her throat.

"Is this going to take a while?" she asked. "Because there's a bottle with my name on it in the other room."

"Should be any moment now," Masego replied.

It took maybe another thirty heartbeats before Hunter began to stir. He yawned, and I saw his muscles tense as he went to cover his mouth but found his arms had been bound. A moment later his entire body moved as if to reach for a weapon that wasn't there, to the amusingly feeble result of him wiggling like a tied hog.

"Tinkles," Archer barked. "Stop making a fool of yourself."

Hunter's eyes swept the room, immediately finding his colleague then moving on to glare at Masego and I.

"Archer," he finally said. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking custody of you," she grunted, unsheathing her longknife and reaching for his binds.

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth, then spent a heartbeat surprised at the typically Praesi gesture coming from me. When had I picked that up?

"He's not getting out of those before I have an oath he's not gonna fight me and mine," I stated flatly.

"He's my responsibility now. If he does, I'll put him down myself."

"Archer," the hero burst out. "She's a villain."

"She's a villain who spared your sorry arse," she spoke sharply. "So watch your bloody mouth. Your entire little stunt abroad has been an embarrassment to the Lady, John. Refuge is going to have to pay reparations to the Tower."

"Lady Ranger is blinded by sentimentality in this," Hunter bit back. "Callow deserves to be free, even if it's run by her old friends."

"Funny how William's crew always talks about freedom," I spoke softly. "Like it's going to feed the country when Praes burns the whole place to the ground on the way out. Like those pretty words assure you a victory instead of a field of corpses from Dormer to Vale."

"You are a traitor to your blood, Squire," the Hunter sneered. "All you deserve is—"

Archer slapped him.

"I don't give one damn what flag flies over Callow, John," the Named said calmly. "And neither should you. You know what I do care about? Following Refuge's only law. Remind me what that law is, Hunter?"

The hero looked mulish.

"I asked you a question. *What is that law, Hunter?*" Archer repeated harshly.

"Whatever the Lady says goes," he muttered.

"And what did Lady Ranger say about the Empire?" she prompted.

"Here there be monsters," Hunter quoted. "Leave it alone."

"But you didn't leave it alone, did you? So you lost a hand and embarrassed us publicly. A shame you can't tattoo yourself better life choices," she continued cuttingly.

"They're tribal," Hunter defended himself.

"Lots of tribes in Vale's merchant quarter, are there?" Archer said, rolling her eyes. "I've had tea with your parents, John. They're drapiers, lovely old couple. The only thing they did wrong was switch you too infrequently."

I was not above admitting to myself that I was finding this entire conversation delightful. A mocking grin tugged at my mouth, though I stayed out of it. For all that Archer was falling on him like a rockslide, he was still one of hers. Adding a few swings of my own might prompt retaliation.

"I officially surrender custody of him to you," I contributed. "I suppose you'll be taking him back to Refuge?"

"Eventually," Archer agreed. "He's to stand judgement before the Lady."

"I did nothing wrong," Hunter growled.

"I'd plan my defence better if I were you," the woman snorted. "She's already pissed she actually has to rule the city instead of leaving it to function on its own, so your case isn't looking good."

I hummed noncommittally.

"You'll be staying in Marchford, then?"

Archer sighed. "Anybody ever tell you you're not great at subtlety, love?"

"Arguably that's her trademark," Masego grinned. "That and setting things on fire."

I shrugged. I'd never intended to dance around the subject: with what was coming, uncertainty about my guest was not something I could afford.

"We'll be under attack in a matter of days," I said. "I doubt devils or what's left of the Silver Spears after the demon's through with them will care about your diplomatic credentials."

"A demon?" Hunter spoke, tone aghast. "Gods, Squire, what did you summon?"

"This wasn't my doing," I retorted sharply. "I'm just cleaning up the mess, and I'd rather not lose ten thousand innocents in the process. Apprentice and Adjutant can only do so much, and I'm still wounded. An additional Named might make the difference."

"I'm not sure I could kill a demon," Archer admitted.

I frowned. "You're a villain? I'd assumed otherwise."

"Not all Roles are so clear cut," the stranger replied.

"Well, that explains everything," I commented drily.

"If we're still in the city when the assault comes, we'll help," Archer finally said.

"We?" Hunter spat.

"We," the woman replied softly. "You need to consider very carefully whether you want to fight me on this, John. My patience is running thin."

That muzzled him effectively enough.

"I'd appreciate it if you informed me if you intend to leave," I told her. "If not, we'll brief you before the fighting begins."

"A briefing. How very formal," Archer drawled. "Tell you what, love. Find us an empty room with a sturdy bed and you can *debrief* me all you want."

I looked her up and down, a little surprised. She *was* pretty, that much was obvious now that her face was visible. Delicate features and beautiful eyes, not to mention she seemed to be hiding away very healthy curves under that mail. Maybe a year ago I would have taken her up on it, but things had changed since then.

"Flattered, but taken," I said.

The ochre-skinned woman grinned the single naughtiest grin I'd ever seen, eyeing me up and down in turn.

"That doesn't have to be a hindrance. The more the merrier," she winked.

Well, she certainly didn't lack for confidence.

"I'll leave you to your heartfelt reunion," I replied instead of humouring her. "Apprentice, we're about due our meeting with Hakram."

He nodded. "I'd like to pick your brains on a few things later, Archer," he said.

"Sounds fun," she dismissed.

He turned to follow me out of the room but paused and squeaked as he passed her by.

"She pinched my ass," he told me in a bewildered tone.

Archer's laughter followed us all the way out.

—

"It took most of the night, but we have the census you asked for," Hakram announced, unrolling a thick leather parchment that presented a map of Marchford.

It was covered in red ink dots, which had the orphan in me twitching. Maps like this cost a fortune, and while this one had likely been looted from the Countess' manor it was still ruining an outrageously expensive item.

"Hard numbers?" Masego asked.

"Under two thousand hearths," the orc replied. "For further details I'll wait on Kilian, since she supervised the effort."

The redheaded Senior Mage entered the inn common room we'd commandeered a moment later, gracing me with a smile as she did. After the last few days I could honestly say I didn't give a single fuck about decorum, so I crossed the distance between us in two strides and dipped her for a kiss. She was just a little taller than me, so this tended to work best when we weren't... occupied on a bed. Or a table. Or once on the desk in Juniper's office, when my legate had been late for a meeting. Her eyes flew open in surprise, but they closed with mine and within moments I had an armful of warm Kilian nestled against me.

"I'm glad to see you too, Cat," she spoke breathlessly when we broke apart.

"Mhm," I replied, eloquent as always.

Masego cleared his throat. "Yes, we're all aware *that's* going on. If we could attend the matter at hand?"

"Give them a moment, warlock's get," Hakram rumbled.

He was smiling softly at us, the sight made slightly horrifying by the sharp fangs displayed. Considering the trove of romance novels under his bunk I wasn't supposed to know about, I wasn't surprised. I shook myself out of my pleasant daze.

"Right. So hearths. We have a bunch of them lying around the city. Why is that important?" I asked.

"A hearth is the magical symbol of a home," Kilian explained. "That has weight, in matters of sorcery."

"The Senior Mage is correct," Apprentice said. "Though it goes deeper than that. A home is a boundary – tales about vampires in the Wasteland being unable to pass a threshold are largely false, but they have a source of truth to them. Hearths are metaphysical anchors."

"An anchor is meant to weigh something down," Hakram grunted. "I was under the impression our problem was that we lacked the kind of power that would need one of those."

"You're thinking in terms of creating something," Masego replied, sounding excited. "Which we will, to an extent, but that's not the core of what we're setting out to accomplish. What you have to keep in mind is that neither devils nor demons are born of Creation. They do not, on a basic level, belong here. That's why they have to be summoned in the first place."

I frowned.

"You're implying that what keeps them out of Creation is essentially a threshold," I guessed.

"Exactly," Apprentice smiled.

"There are extensive records showing that devils are more sensitive to thresholds than any creature borne of Creation, and even the Fae," Kilian said. "Demons are another matter, but theoretically the same reasoning applies."

"The central tenet of diabolism as a magical discipline is that sufficiently strong bindings can force anything to obey your will," Masego informed us. "Even demons, though that's justly been compared to riding a tiger with a bridle made of straw."

"So we can turn individual houses into strongholds that'll keep devils out," Hakram frowned. "That's not enough for a coherent defence, Apprentice."

"You're thinking small, my friend," the dark-skinned man replied cheerfully, pushing up his glasses. "I did say we were going to create something, did I not?"

I took in a sudden breath.

"You want to set up a threshold covering all of Marchford," I grasped.

"A surprisingly accurate guess, for someone with no schooling in sorcery," he approved.

"Just don't talk magical theory at her, she'll fall asleep faster than if she'd drunk a potion," Kilian murmured.

"That was once," I protested. "I'd had a long day."

"Catherine's stubborn ignorance aside," Masego continued, ignoring my objections, "linking a sufficient amount of hearths through ritual would allow me to set up a threshold covering up to the city boundaries."

"How many is sufficient?" Adjutant asked. "We'll need local cooperation for that, and that's a mixed bag at best."

"Twenty-four," Apprentice assessed. "We could link more, but we'd be trading power for precision."

I did not think it a coincidence that the Twenty-Fourth Hell marked the transition from demons to devils.

"That's a pattern," I said. "What do you need to power it?"

"For the initial phase I'll need half a dozen mages per hearth, and myself at the centre to guide the working," Masego replied. "After that, we'll need to keep a fire running in every hearth."

"That sounds easy enough," I frowned.

"This is not something we can afford to mishandle, Catherine," the bespectacled mage replied. "A ritual is not a permanent ward, and the fires will be the component that allows it to keep functioning. If a single hearth stops burning for even a heartbeat, the entire ritual will collapse."

"If it does," Hakram asked quietly. "What happens to the magic that was in the ritual?"

"Every other hearth will blow up and devour everything within thirty yards, at least," Masego admitted. "I could have made this more stable given time, but slapping together a ritual at the last moment always carries certain issues."

I remained silent, clenching my fingers and unclenching them.

"And this threshold will keep the devils out?" I asked.

"Yes," he agreed, meeting my eyes squarely.

"Then do it," I ordered. "But I want you to leave one part of the city uncovered."

I traced a rectangle with my finger on the city map, facing the hills where the demon dwelled.

"I'll need more mages to set up artificial boundaries, but it can be done," Masego frowned. "May I ask why?"

I half-smiled. "You ever read the 'Commentaries on the Campaigns of Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second'?"

Hakram let out a chuckle.

"Armies are like water," the tall orc quoted. "They take the path of least resistance."

"That's our killing alley," I grunted. "It's where they'll attack, and it's where we'll bleed them."

Apprentice's eyes glittered with something like savage joy. "I think I can do a little better than that, actually. I'll need to run the numbers first, so we can discuss it later."

I nodded.

"There's one last matter," I said.

There was no sign of surprise from anyone at the table, which got a raised eyebrow from me.

"You've been looking like you're sitting on something," Hakram said.

Huh. I'd need to work on that, it was something of a liability.

"When you first met Hakram, you could tell he was about to come into a Name," I told Masego.

"My glasses have several enchantments on them," he explained. "Father's work."

"And what do those enchantments tell you when you look at me?"

"That you're on the edge of your third aspect," Apprentice replied.

"I thought as much," I grunted. "But I can't afford to wait around for it. Black did this thing, in Laure, that had me go into a lucid dream."

"Ah, *that*," Masego grimaced. "Yes, I could trigger the epiphany early. I would not recommend that, however. It's one thing to give a Name an early start, another to force an aspect. It will be weaker than if you'd waited for it to coalesce in due time."

"Last time I fought the devils, I broke an arm and leg," I said. "The demon will be in a whole other class. I doesn't matter if I'm weaker in the long term if I don't get to the long term."

"There are risks, Catherine," the mage cautioned me. "If we're already being affected by the corruption, a failure in your dream could be nothing short of disastrous."

"I beat odds, Masego," I replied honestly. "It's what I do. It's the talent that got me this Name in the first place."

The bespectacled mage stirred.

"That kind of talk," he spoke softly, "has me worried."

"Our life isn't for the faint-hearted," I reminded him.

"Risk doesn't worry me unduly," he replied patiently. "But this isn't a villain's risk. Charging in without a plan and trusting your power to see you through is how heroes operate. Villains wait, accumulate power and engage when it is most advantageous to them. Otherwise we lose."

"If we tread carefully now, if we turn timid, we've lost," I said. "Make no mistake, Masego: as things are now, we are *fucked*. We still have the numbers on our side, but not by much – and we're facing a creature that makes a mockery of the kind of warfare we're trained in. If we don't grasp for every advantage in reach, we'll die. And not the pretty, noble kind of death. Our corpses will be puppet for an abomination that'll try to spread across the surface of Creation before enough people step in to kill it."

"Disperse it," he replied automatically. "I'm not saying I won't do it, Catherine. But this is reckless."

I passed a hand through my hair. "I know. Believe me, I know. But we're running out of cards, and the enemy hasn't even shown half their hand."

He sighed. "Fine."

"I know you don't have a sword," I said. "So you can use mine."

He blinked. "A sword? Why would I need that?"

"To... stab me?" I spoke hesitantly.

"Uncle Amadeus just ran you through with his," Masego guessed, morbidly fascinated.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "He didn't need to do that, did he?"

"Just physical touch from another Named is enough," he snorted. "Gods, he's always so melodramatic."

"Tell me about it," I muttered.

I glanced at Kilian, whose face was lined with worry. There was something heart-warmingly straightforward about that. There was no complication there, no myriad of different interests and loyalties at play. The longer we stayed together, the more I found that attractive about her. I still wasn't in love with her, and to be honest I didn't know if I'd ever be. But she was a... companion. Someone I was comfortable spending time with, trusting my secrets to.

"I suppose it'd be too much to ask you to be careful," the redhead said.

"Wrong girl for that, I'm afraid," I smiled.

She let out a long breath and rested her chin on my shoulder. Lightly she kissed the side of my neck and stepped away.

"Try not to get yourself killed, at least," she commanded.

"Centrepiece of my plan," I informed her, then stole a quick kiss.

I turned to Apprentice.

"All right, Masego," I spoke. "Let's get-"

The last thing I saw was an index finger headed for my forehead before darkness took me.

Chapter 26: Seek

"A villain should make plans with the understanding that everything you can conceive of going wrong will, and then a few others things too."

– Dread Empress Regalia

I hit the ground with a thump and half a dozen yelled curses. My fall threw up a cloud of what looked like dark dust, thick and cloying. I groaned and rolled over, wincing since apparently going into a Name dream wasn't enough to make my leg not feel like it had gone a few rounds with an angry ogre. Rubbing the dust out my eyes, I took a look above: cloudy skies as far as I could see, dark and roiling things. The way clouds got just before a storm. I managed to push myself back on my feet with only minimum urge to scream, getting my bearings as I caught my breath. I was surrounded, it seemed, by an endless wasteland of ash and dust.

"I'm honestly not sure whether or not that's an improvement over the swamp," I grimaced.

Last time there'd been landmarks of a sort, a sort of reverse tower where Good Twin had been keeping her smug ass on a chair. Now, though? No sign of a structure in sight. A breeze like a warm breath blew across the plain, shifting dunes of ash and dust in ever-changing patterns. Save for that eerie murmur, there was not a sound to be heard. I checked my belt and saw that my sword was still at my side, already an improvement over last time.

My armour, on the other hand, was noticeably less well-maintained. Black had mentioned to me once that Roles reacted to the way you thought of your Name rather than what you truly were. Heroes were strikingly handsome and heroines wholesomely beautiful because that was how they expected to look. On the other side, good-looking villains could turn ugly in a matter of months if they thought of their Name as a brute's. On others, the effect was subtler. Warlock was said to have stopped aging in the prime of his life, Malicia at the peak of her beauty and my teacher hadn't changed one speck since the day he'd become the Black Knight.

What I thought of myself through the lens of my Name did not seem much different from the way I'd always been. It did, however, seem to include slightly unkempt armour – maybe that'd change if I stopped allowing Hakram to arrange have it polished for me. I would have checked under my aketon to see if the long scar William had gifted me on our first meeting still snaked across my chest, but that would have required unfastening my armour. Not worth the trouble, I decided. I'd expected for something to have happened by now, anything really, but this vision was determined

to be a boring one. I sighed and headed north through the wasteland, picking the direction at random.

My pace was slow but steady, the throbbing in my leg never quite going away. How long I walked I couldn't say: it could have been hours or days. Nothing changed here, not in any meaningful way, and the longer I headed north the more I became uneasy. I'd been out of it for days, last time, and though I did not think forcing an aspect this close to manifestation would take as long I couldn't afford to be out of commission for that long. Masego had mentioned the demon might be able to interfere and though I was confident I could take it on inside my own soul, it occurred to me there might be no fight at all coming.

Maybe it would just keep me asleep while Marchford burned, until one of its devils ripped my throat open.

I shivered even though my forehead was matted with sweat. Demons were not supposed to be thinking creatures, not the way mortals and older devils were. They could mimic speech, the way the... thing that served as the Tower's gatekeeper had, but it was only ever mimicry. They were not born of Creation, and so all that sprang from it was beyond them – or so said the House of Light. Theirs was an intelligence we had no understanding of, as they lacked understanding of us. That was always what unmasked them, in the stories: a missed detail, a small error springing from their inability to truly grasp what it was to be alive. The thoughts kept me company on my lonely trek, and though I knew it was paranoia to believe that growing fear had been planted in me I had to wonder... was that what it wanted me to think?

The first break in the sinister monotony came not as an interruption, per se. Scaling a dune of ash, I noticed there was something buried near the tip of it. A scrap of leather, looked like, warped as if by great heat. Keeping a prudent hand on my sword, I scattered the dust around it. *Not a scrap, a boot.* With a leg still attached to it. I started digging in earnest, unearthing what appeared to be a man's corpse. The flesh and armour were melted badly, but I would recognize the silver scale anywhere: this had been a man-at-arms, one of the Silver Spears. I looked up to the sky with a frown.

"Giant graveyard, is it?" I sighed. "There better not be bloody zombies again."

I moved on after hacking the limbs away just in case. That first finding seemed to have been the droplet to tip over the vase, because I now found a dead body every few moments. Silver Spears at first, men-at-arms and cataphracts forever riding their butchered mounts under the ash, but eventually I started coming across legionaries. Men and women of the Twelfth, who'd died when I'd thwarted the Lone Swordsman in Summerholm. By the time I stumbled on the first of mine, I'd steel myself for it. A

Soninke girl, her corpse not quite desiccated enough to hide the sword wound that had split her head in half. My fingers formed a fist and I ground my teeth.

"I walked the battlefield when the blood was still fresh," I told the sky. "I did not flinch then. Do you really think I'll flinch now?"

There was no answer, not that I'd expected one. I pressed on. It shouldn't have surprised me but it did, when I found Nilin's corpse. No flesh remained and the bones had been blackened as on his pyre, but the senior tribune's markings on his armour betrayed his identity. The Exiled Prince and Page lay in front of him, the bones of their hands threaded together in a morbid embrace.

"I know it was my fault," I admitted. "I take responsibility for it, even if no one is casting the blame in my direction. And yet..."

"Oh, we'll even that score soon enough," someone replied.

The ash under my feet erupted and the thin point of sword nearly ran through my throat – I stumbled away, already on the back foot, and my sword came out with a metallic ring. My doppelganger sat with a smug grin in the dust where she'd apparently half-buried herself waiting for me. This one was a familiar sight. An older version of me, with a pink scar running across the nose and a face hardened by years of war. She wore a regular's chain mail instead of my own plate, her standard-issue sword glinting in the gloom even when covered in ash.

"I had a feeling I'd run into you at some point," I grunted. "I have a feeling stabbing you again will be the most pleasant part of this little jaunt."

Her grin widened and she shook off the dust as she rose to her feet.

"No need for any of that, Cat," she denied. "We're buddies now. I kinda like what you've done with the place."

"You would," I muttered. "You also said we wouldn't fight last time and look how that ended."

Not to mention you just tried to stab me in the throat, I thought but didn't bother saying. Rubies to piglets she'd have a ready-made excuse.

"Things have changed, Cat my girl," she told me. "Thought you lacked the stomach, but you've been nailing it. We got a legion, a nice bunch of competent minions and we're building up a body

count. Should have found a pretext to run Heiress through by now, but nobody's perfect."

She paused.

"Except me," she conceded. "I am perfect."

I wished I'd looted a boot off a corpse, if only so I could throw it at her head.

"They're not my minions," I replied through gritted teeth. "They're my friends."

"The Calamities are living proof you can be both," the doppelganger dismissed, then leaned forward. "But before you go all righteous on me, sweetcheeks, answer me this: if you asked Nauk to rip out some noble's throat, would he even stop to think before obeying?"

He wouldn't. I knew that. She knew I knew that. Hakram might ask me why afterwards, given the same order, but Nauk? He'd laugh and forget it had ever happened before the month was done.

"I wouldn't ask," I replied instead.

"You will," the spirit smiled, the certainty in her troubling. "That's the beauty of this greater good business you've been peddling. You can justify anything, if the final outcome's nice enough."

She waved around her sword, warming up to the subject.

"Heroes might spawn from this orphanage and make a big mess, so we burn it. Those nobles might be trouble down the line, so we poison the wine. That officer will be a liability when I commit treason, so in the worst of the fight she goes."

"I haven't done any of those things," I retorted. "You're just pushing my position to extremes and pretending that's the rules I obey."

"I can't help unless I'm higher up in the ranks, so I engineer a war," my twin said softly. "Extremes? I'm just getting us to the logical conclusion. Don't get me wrong, Cat, I'm on board with this greater good wagon you're driving. I just want us to stop pussyfooting around and get some real changes going."

"It won't get to that," I snarled. "I won't let it get to that."

The doppelganger lightly rested the flat of her sword against her shoulder.

"See, this is the kind of thinking that's holding us back," she complained. "We're not the good guys here, Cat. Let's just... stop

pretending, why don't we? We're the girl that sees something that needs to be done, so we do it the best we can. If that means a few thousand people die?"

She shrugged.

"Well, people die all the time," she said. "Can't make an omelette without burning a few armies, sacking the villages they came from and salting the land that spawned them."

"The entire point of this," I replied coldly, "is to avoid putting Callow to the torch. If I didn't care about the state of the country in twenty years, I'd be with the Swordsman waving a rebel flag."

"Callow burns, sweetheart," she laughed. "That's what it *does*. It burned whenever the Empire came knocking at Summerholm, it burned whenever the First Prince decided it was time to expand the borders. We're the battlefield of this continent. Hells, the only time the Kingdom wasn't putting out fires was when we were starting some of our own on the other side of the border."

"That's why we pay taxes to the Tower now," I said. "The war doesn't end until someone won and there's no real way to beat Praes for good. They tried it, after the Second Crusade, and gave birth to Dread Emperor Terribilis instead. So they win and they rule Callow. Now I just make that rule *work* and we finally break the godsdamned cycle. No more invasions. No more villages put to the sword so that a different flag waves over Laure."

"And you think the rest of Calernia is just going to take that?" the twin laughed. "No, we don't get off that easy. Nobody wants Praes with a granary, Cat. Hiding behind the mountains and fortifying the Vales just buys everyone a few years until the armies are mustered and the dance begins again."

"And what's your solution?" I mocked. "Let's kill everything that looks like it could be a liability and hope it turns out for the best?"

"I already told you how we stop the fires in our backyard," the spirit smiled. "We cross the Vales, with a torch in hand. If everyone else is running from the blaze they're not making trouble for us."

This is why Evil loses, I realized. By overreaching, by thinking you could put all of Calernia on the the defensive and not be buried by the backlash. There had to be a middle way, one between fighting the Praesi and allowing them to plunder Callow. Black understood this, I knew. He'd marginalized the nobles of the former Kingdom and gone to work on the people themselves, tried to remove any reason for rebellion rather than crush those that formed. I couldn't change Callow, I knew that deep down. I wasn't

sure I should. But I could change the system that ruled over it, one victory at a time.

"Where's the other one?" I asked.

"Good Twin died in a tragic accident," the doppelganger informed me. "Her tombstone's over there."

I warily cast an eye where she was pointing, noting there was an actual tombstone. Of sorts. Someone had taken a legionary's breastplate and sunk it into the ground as a marker. My Name vision worked just fine, so I could make out the inscription on the metal.

"I mouthed off," I read, then sighed. "Did you murder her?"

"Calumny," the doppelganger protested, deeply offended. "She died of natural causes."

I frowned. "Is that the name of your sword?"

The doppelganger gave me a shit-eating grin. "Allegedly."

"Can anything die a permanent death here?" I asked.

"Eh, who even knows," the twin shrugged. "If you listen closely, though, you can still hear her spirit whining in the wind."

I tried to listen if only out of morbid curiosity. There was, to my surprise, a noise coming from the tombstone. The breastplate shuddered, then tipped over. A figure emerged, to the dramatic gasping of my current company. Once more an older version of me came into sight, her short hair and once-pristine white robes now marred by ash and dust.

"A zombie," the evil doppelganger announced. "Quick, kill it before it devours us!"

"You *bitch*," the newcomer gasped, glaring at the wretched spirit. "You *buried me alive*."

"Are any of us here really alive, though?" the other deflected, affecting a thinking pose.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. No wonder I ended up in over my head all the time, if this was what the inside of my soul was like.

"Your squabbles are of no interest to me," I informed them. "I'm here for my third aspect. I don't suppose either of you can point me in the right direction?"

"Ah," the evil twin grimaced. "Bit of a problem there."

The good doppelganger rose from her grave, dusting herself off angrily.

"You are reaping what you have sown, Catherine Foundling," she barked. "Selling your soul to Hellgods attracts their like."

"We have a squatter is what she means," the other contributed.

"Fucking Hells," I cursed.

"Exactly," the white-robed twin agreed tartly.

My fingers tightened against the grip of my sword.

"You're saying it's *inside* my soul?" I asked.

"We were real close to that third aspect," the scarred doppelganger noted. "Now it's sitting between us and it."

Asking how that was possible seemed more trouble than it was worth, so I held my tongue. I was not in the mood for a lecture or another flippant answer.

I cocked my head to the side. "So you know what it is?"

"*Lame* is what it is," the evil twin muttered.

"A sign you may not yet be beyond hope," the other one countered. "It is —"

SEEK.

What I heard did not come out of the white-robed girl's mouth. The word coiled through my veins and I fell to my knees, retching drily into the ash. Something was smiling at me, just beyond the edge of my vision. Both of the spirits had gone pale and shivering.

"What was that?" I whispered hoarsely.

"You know what it was," the white-robed doppelganger murmured back, helping me up to my feet.

For the life of me, I could not manage a reply. I felt... soiled, like I'd been dipped in filth until it had seeped into my skin and permeated even my bones.

"And you just let that thing be?" I croaked.

"Not a fight we can win," the other one admitted. "It's been giving it a shot, though. Your Name."

My head swivelled in her direction.

"You mean?"

"You're fond of that little metaphor comparing it to a beast, aren't you?" the evil twin smiled grimly.

"Roles are bound by perception," the white-robed one said. "Though the shape you have given your power is deplorable, I will not deny it has a certain martial might."

The scarred doppelganger walked up to me, colour slowly returning to her cheeks. She patted some dust off my shoulders then clapped me on the back.

"Show that bastard the door, Cat," she ordered. "Then wake up and give that hot redhead a good seeing to, would you? Of all the things we've been nailing lately, she's *definitely* top of the list."

I slapped away her hand.

"The day I need a pep talk from you is the day I retire," I grunted.

Shit, how bad was this demon for even that backstabbing pain in my ass to be trying to be encouraging?

"Oh?" she mocked, "are we-"

The breastplate impacted the back of her head brutally, knocking her to the ground.

"That," the good twin snarled, "was for *burying me alive*."

The other doppelganger did not even stir. I raised an eyebrow at her, reluctantly impressed.

"Go," she said tiredly. "That creature plaguing us is worse than what even Evil can muster. You do the work of the Heavens in ridding us of it, however unwillingly."

I rolled my eyes but the memory of the way it had spoken to me was too fresh for me to make an issue of this. I had more pressing business, regardless. By the time I'd made it to top of the nearest ash dune there was no trace of either of them: my surroundings had shifted, wiping it all away. And yet I was not alone. Something was following me, large footsteps creaking against the ash as the beast stalked me. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *This is my Name. I own it, it does not own me.*

"**Come out,**" I Spoke.

There was a mocking huff of laughter but the beast strode out of its hiding place. I'd wondered what my Role would look like, given flesh, and now I had my answer. No fur and bones for my monster, only the shifting shadows I'd learned to craft spears

out of. It must have been the size of a barn but it moved with deceptive swiftness, coiling around me in an instant. It opened jaw larger than my head, ivory fangs clicking just in front of my nose to see if I'd flinch. Its breath was cold, like the bite of the wind in winter. I stilled the fear that set my heart beating and forced myself to meet its eyes. Darker shadows, the difference between shade and the deepest of night.

"I'm not afraid of you," I lied.

The jaws opened again and in a flash the teeth were closing around my neck. My fingers turned white against the grip of my sword, but I did not flinch. Satisfied, the beast drew back. It stalked away from and shook itself, heading north without another look. Silently, I followed after wiping the beads of blood where the teeth had pierced my skin. It was not long until we found it. It sat alone on a dune, looking at the sky. It looked, I thought, like a child's drawing of a person. Pink naked hairless flesh from its toeless feet to the crown of its head, where I shuddered at what I saw. If it had been tentacles or horns I might have simply thought it a monster and dealt with the fear, but it was neither. Just darkly coloured flesh, cut into smaller threads as a sordid parody of hair and perfectly combed. It did not turn when we approached. It did not breathe. The beast howled and I drew my sword, and only then did it deign to glance in our direction.

I wished it hadn't.

Its lips were sealed, made of the same fleshy growth, and its nose did not have nostrils. Its eyebrows were nothing more than dark ridges but the eyes were the worst. Holes in tightened flesh, empty. I took a step forward, the beast following. The moment I set foot on the ash dune something clicked.

"Seek," I spoke, before it could.

My mind unspooled as I snatched away my aspect, filling with information I should not have known. I knew the exact height of the dune. I knew how many steps would take me to the demon, how I needed to balance my weight to avoid worsening my leg. The flow of knowledge was too great, like I'd opened a floodgate, so I forced it to narrow. This was the aspect I'd been looking for, something beyond the brute equalizer I'd been relying on. A pathfinder to craft solutions, and I knew my first use for it.

How do I get the demon out of my soul?

The thread narrowed, then exploded into paths. My mind followed them down eagerly. And one by one, they stopped. Hit a wall. The creature's lips twitched up and down, its attempt at a smile. It reached for me. My beast sprung forward with a snarl but it was late, too late.

MINE.

I woke up screaming, strapped to a bed.

Chapter 27: Cut

"The worst sin a villain can commit is to hesitate."

-Dread Empress Maleficent II

"She's awake," an orc's voice said.

I recognized it. Male. Adjutant. Trustworthy.

"Take another step and I'll activate the wards on you," someone barked.

Spoken Mtethwa. Soninke, the son of Warlock. Apprentice.

"Masego-"

"That may not be Catherine looking through those eyes," the second voice hissed.

Light flared and I screamed again. Bindings on my legs and wrists, but not made of rope. Roiling blue sorcery, burning into my skin.

"You're hurting her," Adjutant growled.

Angry. He sounded tall and angry, ready for violence.

"Shut up," Apprentice snarled. "Diagnostic spells are complicated enough without – *fale'ibashe*."

I laughed, or sobbed. I'd never heard this man swear in Mthetwa before.

"She's still her. But it got to her third aspect," the Soninke whispered hoarsely. "We have to..."

"What?" Adjutant pressed. "Do what?"

"I don't know," Apprentice bit out. "The corruption is spreading."

"So stop it," the orc barked. "*Now*."

"It's not that simple, it's rooted in the aspect," the mage replied.

"So rip out the godsdamned aspect," Adjutant ordered, thundering.

I could hear something beyond them, faintly. Like a song. I'd heard it before, I knew that. Where was it from?

"I'd be mutilating her soul," the Soninke spoke, sounding sick. "She could die."

Oh, Apprentice. So delicate. Why was he with us? I still wasn't sure. The song was getting easier to make out. There were words, and if I just listened right I could –

"Gods Below, Apprentice, if you don't get started *right now* I will not answer for my actions," the orc said.

Troubled, he was troubled. But a word was spoken that was like an order unto Creation and I slept.

–

There was something missing.

Before I ever opened my eyes, I knew this as well as I knew my own breath. I was no longer tied to the bed, or even in the same room. This was not the manor, everything was too small and the wooden walls were shoddy. There was a window, its painted shutters left open. Night had yet to fall but the sky was full of clouds, as they had been in my dream. This did not feel like a coincidence and I shivered, feeling nauseous. The door to my left swung wide a moment later, Apprentice absently waving a hand and snuffing out a rune I hadn't noticed lighting up on the bedside table.

"Catherine," he said, tone hesitant.

"Masego," I frowned.

Relief took over his face and he hurried to my bedside. His hair was a mess, without most of the trinkets usually in it, and his eyes were red like he hadn't gotten to sleep in too long.

"Lay back," he ordered, and I deigned to obey.

I'd dealt with healers before, and their presumptuousness was usually there for the patient's sake. At least this one didn't drink, unlike the man I'd had to rely on at the Pit. His hands were soft but sure as he inspected my wrists, grimacing at the sight of the healing burns on them. They throbbed dimly, though not as much as William's gift of a scar did on bad days.

"It's not as bad as I thought," Apprentice said, keeping one of my pupils open with one hand and passing a finger wreathed in flame in front of the eye with the other. "Your eyesight is unaffected and the discoloration I'll be able to fix, with the proper ritual."

"Discoloration?" I repeated weakly.

There was a strange taste in my mouth, and not the kind you got after a long sleep. Someone had fed me a potion. Everything still felt hazy. Masego paused, smothering the flame and taking his hand out of my sight.

"I'm sorry, Catherine," he said. "Burning out the contamination was harder than I thought. Some of the... effects may be permanent."

"I feel fine," I protested.

"I know," he acknowledged. "And I've been pushing a needle into your cheek for the last twenty heartbeats."

I jerked away my head, watching a small sliver of metal fly away and land on the floor.

"I- I didn't," I began, not sure what to say.

"It only affects the left side of your face," he explained, and I could feel him make an effort to be dispassionate.

I appreciated that more than I could put into words. I felt like I was walking on the edge of a precipice, and even the slightest show of emotion might tip me over.

"Your right leg," he said, walking around the bed and gently pulling away the covers after I nodded my permission. Someone had put me into soft cotton trousers at some point. "Try to kick with it."

I broke into a hiss of pain halfway through. A shadow passed through Masego's eyes, gone as quickly as it had come.

"The limb remains mostly functional, and I'll brew you something for the pain," he said. "But you'll have a limp for the rest of your life."

"The necrotized flesh," I guessed.

The dark-skinned mage looked away.

"If I'd begun to work on containment quicker, you'd still have full functionality," he admitted, ashamed.

I closed my eyes. Every inch of me wanted to lash out at him right now. Slowly I took in a breath, then let it out.

"You saved my life," I said.

He looked pained.

"Catherine, I-"

"Masego," I interrupted. "You've known Black much longer than I have. If he knew I'd been corrupted by a demon, what would he do?"

The bespectacled man let his fingers ball into a fist.

"He'd kill you," he said softly. "Immediately, without warning, and destroy the corpse. He would then quarantine everyone you'd come in contact with and do the same to anyone affected, however slightly."

"And he'd be right to do so," I whispered.

I let a long moment pass, which he seemed unable or unwilling to break. Several times he opened his mouth, then closed it. I scrambled for whatever little strength I had left in me and steeled myself.

"Tell me," I ordered. "Tell me why I feel like I'm missing a limb I've never had."

The dark-skinned man bit his lip.

"I operated on your soul," he said. "The aspect that got corrupted needed to be cut out, or it would continue to spread."

I forced my hands to stop shaking.

"It's gone, the entire thing?"

"And some other parts of your soul," he admitted. "I did not have the right tools to be entirely precise."

I smiled bitterly. My body was already a mangled mess, even if mage healing had seen to it precious few scars showed. Now it seemed my very soul was following suit. I wondered what would happen if they buried me in consecrated grounds after my death. The thought sent a fresh shiver of fear down my spine: tinkering with a soul in any way was blasphemy of the highest order.

"No replacement will grow, will it?" I asked softly.

"The Name of Squire is permanently crippled," he replied just as quietly.

I looked away, through the window. The clouds were roiling, just like the magic that had bound my wrists when I'd been screaming. I forced a smile on my face.

"I suppose I'll have to do with two aspects, then," I told him.

Masego's face was unreadable, and for a long moment he remained silent.

"You don't have to do that, you know," he finally said. "I was raised by a villain. I know we're not untouchable. We bleed. We cry."

"I can't afford either of those," I replied, keeping my tone calm. "I don't have the time for it."

"I don't think you can afford *not* to. Not anymore," Apprentice said.

"Black-" I started.

"Wept, when he buried his parents," Masego interrupted me gently. "Father was there, so I know."

"*I am not weak*," I snarled, the words escaping me against my will, and my fist broke the bedside table into kindling.

He did not flinch.

"It's not a weakness, to acknowledge when you've been hurt," the bespectacled man replied. "We all have to stop sometimes. Roles don't make us more than human, Catherine. They just give us powers and responsibilities."

He was speaking from the heart, and maybe that was why I didn't ram my fist into his face. He was too genuine to be trying to hurt me, at least wilfully. The anger drained out of me, and the strength it had brought followed.

"I can't stop," I replied tiredly. "I owe people better than that. Gods, Masego, not even two years out of Laure and I have enough dead on my conscience to fill a dozen graveyards. I can't let it be meaningless. I can't lose."

To my shame and fury, tears were welling up in my eyes. Like I was a bloody child with a scraped knee. My own body was betraying me, with trembling hands and a throat that wouldn't stop choking up. And now there was *fear* in me, because of that stark reminder that there were things that cared nothing for how beyond reach a Name was supposed to make me.

"When you came back from trying to rescue the wounded," Apprentice said. "I expected you to be in shock. Devils are some of the most horrifying creatures to ever be born of Creation and you'd just seen them slaughter hundreds of your men."

"I pulled through then," I muttered angrily, "and I'll pull through now."

Masego sighed.

"I was honestly more worried about you when you started bantering with Hakram than when you came in barely able to walk," he admitted. "People don't just walk off that kind of experience, Catherine, not even those with Names."

"I do," I spoke through gritted teeth.

The mage slowly rose to his feet, then looked at me sadly.

"I shouldn't have to tell you how dangerous it is, for a villain to lie to themselves," he replied, and left me to my thoughts.

The words lingered in the room long after he'd left.

—

I wasn't supposed to leave the room, I learned.

Whatever it was Masego had done to my soul, it had left it vulnerable. The wards on the bedroom where I was kept it safe from outside influences, but until dawn tomorrow I could not wander. Visitors were allowed, but only one at a time. Hakram came first, with reports and some of my personal effects.

"Apprentice's ritual worked," the orc told me. "The boundaries were set and we're preparing defences for when the enemy comes. Juniper went over the reports from your encounter with the devils, and she's cooked up some countermeasures with Pickler's help."

"And the city?" I asked.

"It's been quiet," he grunted. "The sky has people afraid to come out, and we've found few volunteers to join the defences. Ratface managed to dig up a few mages, but there's less than twenty in total and most wouldn't qualify for legion service."

"They have to be watched over," I said. "The firefly devils make them a liability. Has there been any sign of them or the Silver Spears?"

"Our scouts have seen a few devils, but they're staying away for now. There's a watch set up to keep an eye on the hills, so the moment the Spears come out we'll know."

"It'll be soon," I murmured.

"The Hellhound agrees," Adjutant gravelled. "Two days at most."

"I'll be back in fighting shape by then," I said.

Hakram paused, then licked his lips.

"Will you?" he asked. "There'd be no shame in sitting this one out, Cat. You're still recovering."

"I will not *sit pretty* in this fucking room while the city is under attack," I growled.

Adjutant raised a hand in appeasement.

"If you say you'll be in fighting shape, you'll be in fighting shape," he replied.

We talked for a little while longer, then he rose.

"I'd stay, but I have duties," he gravelled. "I'll leave the reports with you. Send a runner if you need anything."

I waved him away pleasantly, keeping my dismay off my face. I knew everything was in good hands – if anyone could prepare Marchford for what was coming, it was Juniper – but I could not quell the feeling that this entire situation was slipping out of my grasp. The bundle of parchments was full of logistics and schedules, and though I knew it was important stuff my mind refused to focus on it. I eventually set them aside and lay back on the bed, looking at the ceiling. I was still staring at the wooden panels, thinking of nothing, when Kilian came in.

"Cat," she breathed, and before I could blink I had a lapful of redhead in my arms.

I let my face rest against the crook of her neck and basked in the warmth.

"Kilian," I replied belatedly.

For the first time today I felt the ever-present tremor in my arms cease.

"I was worried," the mage said. "I mean, *obviously* I was worried but..."

"Yeah," I spoke quietly. "I get it."

There'd always been a chance that a sliver of what made me Catherine Foundling would be gone, by the time Masego was done. I still wasn't sure there wasn't, and the notion definitely wasn't going to help me sleep at night. If there was something missing, would I notice? *Could* I notice? The feeling that something was missing had yet to abate. Maybe it never would. Kilian wiggled a little out of my grasp, and to my surprise I found I'd been clutching at her like she was a lifeline. She kissed my forehead gently, and then her lips were on mine. My blood heated up in the best way and I found my hands reaching for the small of her back under her tunic, stroking the soft skin and then greedily going

for lower. She let out a small sound of pleasure, then lightly bit the side of my neck with an impish smile.

"Are you sure your body can handle that?" she asked, with more than a little lust in her eyes.

"Only one way to find out," I replied, and tipped her under me in the bed.

There was precious little talking after that.

—

We lay together afterwards, more intertwined than not.

It'd been a while since we'd had the time to just bask in the afterglow, without any pressing need to get anything done afterwards. She wasn't due for a meeting for another bell, she'd told me. My body felt sore but for once it was a pleasant sort of soreness: I lazily reached for my shirt, which had at some point ended up in the kindling I'd made of the former bedside table.

"You don't need to hide it, you know," Kilian murmured, tracing the red scar across my chest with a finger.

That got a pleasurable shiver out of me, but I put on the shirt nonetheless.

"I don't like to leave it out in the open," I admitted.

"Orcs have it right about scars, I think," the redheaded mage said. "They're a reminder that you were strong enough to survive, not a mark of shame."

"Doesn't make it any prettier to look at," I replied.

"Makes you different," Kilian told me. "That's not a bad thing."

I ran a hand up her ribs, then allowed a finger to trace where the same scar would be on her. My lover shuddered, eyes fluttering but never quite closing. Now if she bit her lip after that, it meant we were about to go for a second round. I'd learned to recognize that sign very quickly, given the benefits picking up on it gave. Instead she moved a little closer to me, and I was only half-disappointed: strenuous exercise was still difficult, and strenuous was the least of adjectives I'd grant to spending time in bed with Kilian.

"You're trembling again," she noted quietly.

I moved away, but she grasped my shoulder and held me back.

"It's all right," she whispered.

She smiled gently.

"I'm afraid," she admitted.

That was the way it always went with her. She never shied away from speaking her own weaknesses, just to make me comfortable with acknowledging mine. I loved that about her, even if I didn't quite love her.

"We're in a bad situation," she continued. "And you've seen it up close, unlike me."

I let myself come close to her again, putting an arm over her stomach and slipping another under her.

"It's bad," I agreed softly. "And I don't know how we're going to get out of it."

Her hand came up to stroke the side of my cheek, and though I saw it there was no feeling from the side of my face. I felt my throat choke up.

"It's that side, then," she murmured with a frown.

She didn't stop, though she moved her fingers further down to my neck.

"You're soothing me like I would a horse," I muttered with a snort.

"You don't have to save us every time, Cat," she told me, ignoring my attempt to change the subject. "We can help too. Isn't that the point of having a legion?"

"If I need you to do my dirty work for me," I replied, "then why do I deserve to be in charge?"

Kilian sighed, then drew away her hand to clasp one of mine.

"Juniper rants about you now and then," she informed me. "About your recklessness, about how you tend to think with your fists. But for all that, never once have I heard her question your ability to lead the Fifteenth. Do you really think that will change because you won't have a third aspect?"

I clutched her hand tighter, and I couldn't really express how much it meant to me that even when it almost became painful she didn't try to unlace our fingers.

"I fucked up," I whispered. "I thought maybe if I had the power I could get us out of this mess, but all I did was make it worse. It's coming, Kilian. For us. We're preparing for the devils and the Spears, but it's not them we should be afraid of. I made the wrong decision, and it might not have been the only one."

I hesitated, then spoke the fear I'd been carrying in me since the night we'd decided to defend Marchford.

"What if I condemned all of us to worse than death, just because I wanted to be principled for once? Because I wanted to do the *right thing*."

The words came out bitterer than I'd thought they would.

"There's been Squires before you," Kilian whispered back. "There will be Squires after you. But we're not following a Name, you see, we're following Catherine Foundling. And I don't think she's out of the game yet."

I didn't fight the tears that time, and the last thing I remembered was Kilian smoothing away my hair as she settled the covers around me.

For all that, I did not sleep well.

Chapter 28: Prelude

"Look, if he didn't want to be fed to my acid-spewing crocodiles he shouldn't have brought me bad news."

-Dread Emperor Malignant II, the Particularly Petty

It'd been a while since I'd had a proper Callowan breakfast.

Eggs, sausage and black pudding with a generous portion of buttered bread. The accompanying pot of tea was poor fare compared to the fancy brews my officers – Aisha in particular, who carried a stash imported from across the sea even on campaign – but the taste was pleasantly familiar. Tea wasn't grown in Callow: it had to be imported from the Free Cities and Ashur, the cheap stuff from Nicae being most popular. Mercantis was said to hitch up the price on the way north, but no less should be expected from the City of Bought and Sold. I'd woken before dawn and gotten out of room the very moment I could, slipping away from the personal guard that attempted to follow me without a second thought. Tired of Legion fare I'd sought a Callowan inn and ignored the scared looks the innkeeper kept shooting me as I ordered.

Service was prompt and the fare hearty, though I was starting to get irritated at the skittishness of the innkeeper and her husband. They didn't seem to recognize me, at least, which was refreshing. People had this unpleasant tendency to get deferential around me, these days, but the distance here was because of my Legion armour and not my station. The only local who didn't jump at my every twitch was a young dark-haired girl who couldn't be more than seven, peeking curiously at me from behind tables. Her parents had yet to notice her, apparently. I

smiled at her while sipping at my mug of tea and she trotted up to me, sliding on the bench across the table.

"I'm Lily," she gabbled.

"Hello, Lily," I replied with a smile. "I'm Cat."

She nodded seriously, then scrunched up her nose. "Are you a Deoraithe?"

"Lily," the innkeeper suddenly barked. "Get off that bench right this instant!"

"It's all right," I said, waving away the objection. "It's a quiet morning. I wouldn't mind a little company."

Lily glared. "I'm not *little*, I'm six," she informed me.

I smothered a grin. Her mother seemed rather horrified at the idea of the child talking with me, but she seemed even more afraid to offend me by yanking Lily away from the table and hiding her away. She ended up hovering around the table before taking a seat next to her daughter after seeking wordless permission from me, clutching her offspring tightly. Lily tried to wiggle out to no avail.

"I'm half-blooded, I think," I told the little girl. "I'm a little too pale for both my parents having been from the People."

The child blinked. "How can you not know?"

"Don't be rude to patrons, Lily," the innkeeper said with the mechanical promptness of many repetitions. "Not everybody knows their mum and dad like you."

"That's sad," the daughter said, patting my hand for comfort.

The mother looked panicked, but the tension loosened a bit after it became obvious I'd taken no offence.

"I'm used to it," I shrugged. "Life at the orphanage wasn't bad – I've seen people have much rougher childhoods."

I'd never realized quite how privileged I'd been to get an education and three meals a day until my first forays into the Lakeside district. There were people there who spent their days on backbreaking labour and barely made enough to put food on the table. The only difference the Conquest had made there was that Mazus' hunger for gold had driven ever more people to live in the wretched slums as their businesses went under. It would take years to undo the damage he'd done to the city's economy.

"You're Callowan, then," the innkeeper said, tone puzzled. "I'd heard some of the soldiers in this legion are."

Fear flashed through her eyes when she realized she'd used a rather familiar tone.

"No disrespect was meant, ma'am," she added hastily.

"I've never been easy to offend," I told her drily. "And after dealing with Wasteland nobility it's a rather welcome change not to have to look for double meanings everywhere."

"You've met *nobles*?" Lily breathed out, excited. "What were they like?"

"Most of them deserve to end up in a crocodile pit," I replied frankly. "But there are some who're aren't bad people."

Lily had responded to the mention of crocodiles by making vaguely reptilian noises and pretend-biting her mother's arms, much to the woman's dismay.

"I waved at the Countess, once," the child told me when she got bored. "She didn't wave back though."

I snorted. "Well, she's had a busy year."

Rebellions didn't spawn out of thin air. Most likely she'd been sitting on a plan for years, keeping her moves innocuous enough that my teacher's agents wouldn't pick up on them.

"People say she's going to be queen," Lily informed me. "She's engaged to a duke and everything."

I smiled mirthlessly. "That only happens if she wins the rebellion, Lily. And I wouldn't count on it."

That was, apparently, a little too close to home for her mother. The child was ushered away, told to go help her father make her breakfast. She muttered something about hating porridge and scampered off, though not before waving me goodbye. I waved back bemusedly. To my surprise, the innkeeper remained seated across from me.

"Ma'am, I don't mean to pry but..." she started.

"Ask," I replied. "If it's restricted information I won't tell you, but there's no harm in asking."

There were a few threads of grey in the woman's hair, but the colour of it and the shape of her face was the same as her daughter's – I could see the resemblance, if I cared to look. She screwed up her courage after a moment.

"Is it true, about the demon in the hills?" she said.

I grimaced. "Yes. It was kept bound in some sort of temple but someone let it loose."

And we'll have a reckoning for that, won't we Heiress? That much I would swear oath to, and the longer that debt when unpaid the longer the price would be when I collected.

"But the Fifteenth will stay to protect the city?" she pressed.

"Orders came down from the top on the matter," I replied, hiding my amusement.

The innkeeper let out a sound of relief. "The legion has behaved well, for an army. You don't drink as much as the Exiled Prince's men did."

I very much doubted that, considering the Praesi relationship with spirits, but Juniper had likely given orders to keep the drinking out of sight.

"I'd heard there were a few incidents," I probed.

"There were scuffles," she admitted. "Some of the older men say it's all the Empire's fault."

They were technically correct, I had to admit.

"That tall orc, the one they call Deadhand, he stopped it before it got out of hand," the innkeeper continued. "And Tribune Ratface has been making rounds to see the people displaced by the goblins are properly fed. It's bought a lot of goodwill, with those of us who remember the last war. Armies are not easy guests no matter who they obey to."

Well now, Supply Tribune. I hadn't seen much of him lately, since he wasn't needed for most war councils, but it was pleasing to hear he'd been keeping busy.

"He's a good sort, Ratface," I spoke over the rim of my tea mug.

"You one of his, then?" the innkeeper asked.

"Something like that," I replied vaguely.

She clearly recognized the non-answer for what it was and did not pursue the subject. Apparently the fact that I'd yet to ask for her head had qualified me as not a monster, because there was precious little fear in the older woman now.

"I suppose it helps you have a Callowan in charge of the legion," she decided, then turned a curious eye on me. "You ever met her, the Squire?"

"A few times," I agreed.

"Doesn't seem proper, to have one of us a villain," she said. "But it may not be a bad thing, you get my meaning? If the Empire's going to stick around, we might as well have a voice in the Tower. Heard she helped hang Mazus so she can't be all Evil. Nasty piece of work, that man."

And how did you hear that, I wonder? There'd only been a handful of people there that night, and only one of them had the means to spread rumours that far and that quickly. I resisted the urge to clench my fingers. *What are you up to, Black?* Every time I thought I'd sketched out his endgame, something else cropped up to put the design into doubt.

"He got what was coming to him," I agreed softly.

The front door was suddenly forced open and the innkeeper immediately flinched back, rising to her feet. I cast a look and saw the Fifteenth had finally caught up: Lieutenant Tordis and a handful of orcs snapped a salute as soon as they saw me.

"Lieutenant," I greeted her, spearing the last of the now-cold sausage and taking a bite.

"Lady Squire," she replied, fist over heart. "I apologize for disturbing your breakfast, but a war council has been convened."

I heard the gasp from the innkeeper when my identity was revealed, but did not bother to turn. I put down the remains of the sausage and finished my tea before sliding two golden aurelii on the table – over fifteen times what the meal was worth, but what did coin really mean to me these days? I glanced at the greying woman.

"When the enemy is sighted," I told her, "take your family to the centre of the city. It'll be the safest place."

I passed Tordis by and stepped into the morning light.

—

I'd been under for two days but my officers had not been idle.

I'd yet to take a look at the outer defences, but as we made for the council I saw that Juniper had ordered a second set of walls further in – though "walls" was perhaps too ambitious of a word. A ring of houses had been collapsed to form a citadel inside Marchford, the stone and wood stacked as a makeshift barricade already manned by legionaries. The Countess' manor was long-abandoned, too removed from the rest of the city to be defensible. The people left bereft of a home by my sappers' work had been packed in taverns, inns and the houses of relatives willing to put them up. Still, central Marchford was densely packed. The main avenues were kept clear by patrols so that

deployments would not be hindered when the battle started, though eyes were peeking at us through blindfolds all the way through. Juniper had picked a large guildhall as the headquarters for the Fifteenth, clearing out the occupants and nailing most opening shuts with wooden planks.

The central hall was bustling with my legate's men, reports coming in and orders coming out every few moments. Close to the wall in the back a pair of tables had been forced together to accommodate maps and seat all of the general staff – most of which, I saw, was missing. Nauk and Hune were there, as the highest-ranked officers after the Hellhound, and so were Hakram and Pickler. No sign of Kilian and Ratface, or even Aisha. I dismissed Lieutenant Tordis absent-mindedly, my attention already on the conversation to come. If so many were elsewhere then something had happened requiring their direct attention: that both Kilian and Apprentice were absent was telling in and of itself. Nauk eyed my bad leg with a frown but held his tongue as I made my way up to the others, keeping my pace steady so the limp wouldn't be too obvious. I had a feeling tapping into my Name would allow me to power through the pain if I ever needed to run, but for daily life I might well have to take up Masego's offer of herbs to take the edge off. *Or start taking my drinking more seriously.*

"I'm guessing we have a situation," I spoke up, disinclined to indulge in small talk.

"The enemy has been sighted," Commander Hune spoke in that incongruously delicate voice of hers.

"The Silver Spears?" I asked.

The last report I'd read had made it clear the devils were out there, though they'd yet to make a move. Juniper wouldn't have sought me out unless the situation had changed more than that.

"They'll be on us by nightfall," Nauk growled. "The bastards finally arrived."

Nightfall, huh. I supposed it'd be too much to hope whatever corruption the mercenaries had gone through wouldn't allow them to see in the dark. When had I ever been that lucky? I glanced at the maps on the table, then frowned. There was half a dozen scrying bowls scattered in a half-circle around where Juniper stood. I tapped the rim of the one closest to me, then cast an eye on the Hellhound.

"I thought the demon scrambled scrying?"

The grim-faced orc bared her teeth. "Apprentice's threshold ritual changed things. As long as the point of origin and the

point of reception are under the ritual's aegis, our mages can the simplest versions of the spell."

Useful, that. Would allow my legate to react immediately to changes on the battlefield, if I grasped her intent correctly. There'd been no time to set up that sort of fanciness when we'd first taken on the Silver Spears, but defending a city was a different sort of business.

"Are we ready?" I finally asked, because what else could I say?

"I've spent most of my time setting up our killzone," Pickler smiled unpleasantly, spindly fingers tracing the rectangle I'd told Masego to leave out of his ritual. "When the devils come, they will be warmly received."

I nodded. "And the Spears?"

"They'll go through the west," Juniper grunted. "Quickest way to get to a hearth, and that's what they'll be aiming for. There's a wider avenue where their horse will be able to charge properly."

"I'll be waiting for them there," Nauk spat, and his fists tightened hard enough the knuckles popped.

"We'll have to concentrate our forces on the mercenaries," Hune spoke. "If the devils get loose in the city our entire defence will collapse."

"Then I'll be dealing with the devils," I murmured.

No sign of surprise from anyone. I supposed that had been a rather obvious fit for me. *Takes a monster to kill a monster, doesn't it?*

"Robber will be commanding the sappers assigned to that sector," Pickler informed me. "You'll have his full cohort."

"You'll get another company to follow you when the swords come out," Juniper growled. "We haven't settled on which one."

"Words was put out," Hakram told me. "Seven different companies volunteered – I have the list, if you want to take a look."

"Don't need it," I replied. "I'm taking the Forlorn Hope."

That finally got a reaction.

"Is that wise, Lady Squire?" Commander Hune asked, her buckler-sized palm resting on the table. "Deserters are not known for their ability to hold under pressure and that part of the battlefield will be the most brutal."

"She means they could put a knife in your ribs and leg it if things look bad enough," Pickler spoke more frankly.

"This is the very kind of situation I formed the company for," I replied. "If they can't be used, they should be hanged."

I'd spoken calmly and without raising my voice but I could see several of them repressing the urge to move back. I smiled mirthlessly: one of these days, Praesi would learn to stop thinking that mercy and ruthlessness were mutually exclusive. I'd made the Forlorn Hope with the intent of deploying it in battle: if it could not be deployed, it could return to the gallows I'd snatched it from. There were only so many chances I was willing to give people.

"That's settled, then," Adjutant said, shutting the door on the topic. "We have one last issue to address: Archer has yet to take a stance on whether or not she'll participate."

"Said she'll only talk with you," Juniper spat, clearly disgruntled.

Not much of a diplomat, that one. I didn't bother to specify which woman the statement was meant for, since it could easily go both ways.

"I'll handle it," I said. "Nothing else?"

The Hellhound shook her head. I almost walked out, but forced myself to stay a moment longer.

"Luck in battle," I told my officers.

"Luck is for amateurs," Juniper replied with bared teeth. "I have a plan."

If there was ever to be a motto for the Fifteenth, I decided, that would be it. *I have a plan. Watch how it goes south.*

—

Archer was on a rooftop, because Named were inevitably afflicted with a deep thirst for melodrama.

Foot on the ledge, she looked in the distance where a cloud of dust revealed the Silver Spears were getting closer. I hoisted myself up through the trapdoor and waited for her to acknowledge my presence, sighing when it became clear she wouldn't. Out of morbid curiosity I cleared my throat, just to see how far she'd be willing to push the farce. Fluidly the woman turned and a flash of silver was the only warning I got. The throwing knife had been placed expertly, spinning in a trajectory that would see it bury straight in my throat. Without missing a beat, I snatched it out of air.

"You can throw faster than that," I said.

"I can," Archer agreed, finally bothering to face me. "But this is still slightly swifter than a mundane mortal could manage."

She'd been checking how much my Name had been affected by my latest debacle. Fair enough, even if this was an idiot way to go about it.

"I'm told you won't talk with my legate," I grunted.

"I don't speak terms with minions," she replied easily.

Maybe if I'd had an easier fortnight I would have been politer about it, but my well of patience was running pretty dry.

"Legate," I corrected flatly. "She's my *legate*. Regardless, here I am. Have you made a decision?"

If anything my abruptness seemed to amuse her. My irritation ratcheted up a knot in response.

"While your battle is not unworthy, is it not mine," she shrugged. "Hunter and I will leave when enemy assaults the city. We'll kill a few on the way out, out of politeness."

"Fine," I grunted.

Making my way down the trapdoor was going to be a godsdamned pain, but jumping down into the street would probably be worse. I turned to leave.

"Not going to try to convince me?" Archer asked, mildly surprised.

I shot her an aggravated look.

"I don't have the time or the patience for this kind of game," I said. "You'll fight or you won't. I get the feeling not much I'll say will tip the balance either way."

"Considering the corner you're in," the ochre-skinned woman spoke, "are you sure you can afford not to?"

I couldn't help it – I laughed, right in her face. The look of incredulity that got me was a memory that would warm me on cold nights.

"I'm always in a fucking corner, Archer," I told her. "I don't think I've been in a fight where I wasn't horribly outclassed since I can remember."

I spread my arms and turned the palms up, encompassing all of the city.

"And yet, I'm still here. Standing." I said softly. "So scuttle off if you want to. I don't need you to make this a victory."

I leaned forward and flashed her a hard smile.

"You think one less aspect and a limp is going to stop me? I don't win fights because I'm the Squire – I win them because I'm Catherine Foundling. Watch them take a swing. See *where it gets them*."

Interlude: Greenskins

"The Kharsum word for war is derived from the one used for a full cookpot. That tells you everything you need to know about how the Clans think of Creation."

– Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

"That was a mistake," Lieutenant Balcer offered.

"It got worse," Captain Clipper suggested instead, flirtatiously allowing her teeth to peek through her chops.

She did have superb canines, Robber was forced to admit, but she was no Pickler. It was his curse to always be interested in the unattainable ones, he'd found, and the Senior Sapper was as unattainable as it got. A Rock Breaker tribe boy like him with the direct daughter of a Matron line? That was the punchline to a joke about overreaching, not a plan of action. Unlike humans, the Tribes didn't glorify people trying to love above their social stature – they buried them in shallow graves. And for all that the Fifteenth was not the Grey Eyries, there would always be that invisible line there. He'd long made his peace with that.

"You're all amateurs," he told his minions. "And no, that wasn't another suggestion. Clearly we should be going with *I can't believe that worked*."

There was a murmur of approval from the ranks, though some filthy traitorous elements dissented.

"Fear the goats," someone called out. "The one true motto of the Fifteenth."

"Captain Borer," the tribune addressed his second-in-command loudly. "Write up that man for insubordination. And poor taste."

Borer was one of his very favourite people in Creation simply because the other goblin had no sense of humour whatsoever. Probably because he was Deep Pit tribe, that whole bunch breathed in all sorts of nasty stuff when they were young. Borer squinted at the traitor, then sighed.

"That's a woman, sir," the captain told him. "Lieutenant Rattler."

"You sure?" Robber asked, cocking his head to the side. "That's clearly a man's nose."

Rattler flipped him off.

"Add to the list that she was emotionally hurtful," the yellow-eyed goblin added without missing a beat, grinning at the wave of jeers that got.

Running a sapper cohort wasn't like leading regulars. For one, sappers were all insane. You had to be, to willingly choose a career path that would see you deal with notoriously volatile munitions on a daily basis. There was also the fact that they were the mostly lightly armed soldiers in the Legions of Terror yet regularly saw action on the frontlines. That was fine because leading crazy people, in Robber's opinion, was a lot like being in prison. If you wanted your authority unquestioned you had to walk up to the biggest prisoner on the cell block, rip out their eyes and make a necklace out of them. Metaphorically speaking. So far, anyway. A whistle came from further ahead, lilting and then going high. *Enemy in sight.*

"You hear that, ladies and gentlemen?" the yellow-eyed tribune called out. "That's the sound fun makes when it begins."

He saw more than a few sappers shiver in eager anticipation. Crazy, the lot of them.

"So let me hear it, before you get to battle positions," he called out. "What's the operational creed of this cohort?"

"KILL THEM, TAKE THEIR STUFF!" the call came back.

Robber faked wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. Considering goblins didn't even have tear ducts, the absurdity was delightful.

"Go forth, my minions!" he cackled.

—

"Our guests have arrived," Aisha said.

Juniper could see the devils trickling in through the scrying bowl herself. Foundling's assessment of how many she'd killed seemed roughly accurate: a quick headcount put the enemy at around eighty. Most of them were the smaller types she'd had reports on, the iron-clawed creatures with fur and a swarm of fireflies. The larger ones would be more dangerous, given their ability to shrug off crossbow bolts, but Pickler's traps had been designed specifically to deal with their kind. The legate looked

away from the bowl and absent-mindedly adjusted the figurine representing Squire and her Forlorn Hope – it had moved a little to the left of the accurate spot when someone had jostled the table.

“Word from the west?” the Hellhound asked.

“The enemy hasn’t engaged,” the mage overlooking that particular bowl informed her.

The grim-faced orc repressed the urge to sigh. *Humans*, she thought unkindly.

“I’m aware of that,” she said. “What do the Silver Spears look like, sergeant? How were they modified by the corruption?”

The man frowned, peering into the softly glowing water. “Gods Below,” he said, looking nauseous. “You should take a look yourself.”

Juniper stepped closer, elbowing the sergeant aside. The mage on the other side of the scrying spell was holding up a mirror pointed at the enemy, standing on the roof of a house beyond the sapper-built wall. What the sorcery revealed was... troubling. The men-at-arms had been visibly mutated, growing cysts of flesh filled with dark pus. Some had eyes blinking from all over their faces, or even their hands, though the most disgusting of it was the way their bodies now overflowed their armour. The cataphracts were cleaner, but somehow that made it worse. Their silvery armour looked like it had melted shut and there was no delineation where the man ended and the horse began. The mounts themselves looked sickly and the hair over their skin was largely gone, patches of flesh falling away from their flanks in long strings.

The spell focused on the cataphract at the head of the pack, whose helm had been twisted in a sordid unmoving metal grin. The mage shivered at her side, but the Hellhound remained unmoved. That last cataphract seemed a likely candidate for the leader of the host, though how led the Silver Spears still were was debatable. Worth making a priority target, but not launching a specific assault to take out: she doubted morale would be an issue for the former mercenaries, as far gone as they were. Unfortunate that the usual shock and awe tactics that were the Legion’s bread and butter wouldn’t work, but this could lend advantage in other ways. If the minds of the Silver Spears were affected, they were unlikely to be able to manage sophisticated battle tactics. *Bait and switch will be effective.*

The legate calmly put her orders through the spell and waited for a messenger on the other side of the city to carry them to Nauk. Foundling’s insistence that the orc commander be the one handling the front with the mercenaries had come as an unpleasant

surprise, though she understood the internal politics driving it. Squire was still whipping herself over the death of Nilin, she decided, and so hadn't had the heart to refuse Nauk's request. Hune would have been a better fit. She was a coldblood, Juniper suspected, much like she'd once thought Hakram was. Incapable of anything but the shallowest of emotions, unmoved by fear and with natural assertiveness. Had the ogre been anything but a legionary that would have made her very dangerous indeed, but as an officer of the Fifteenth that meant she could be relied on not to lose her head. Nauk had too much of a temper, much like her own mother. *Though Mother does not sink into the Red Rage when displeased.*

Still, for all that the other orc was a skilled commander and cleverer than he looked. Or acted, sometimes. With the spectre of Foundling's disapproval driving him, he should manage to keep himself in line. The parts of Hune's kabili that hadn't been assigned to him would remain posted in strategic locations as a quick-deployment reserve, ready to plug in gaps when they inevitably arose. She'd spent days and nights going over the contingencies for this fight.

"You're smiling again," Aisha observed.

Was she? The Hellhound wiped her face clean of emotion. The dark-skinned aristocrat that served as her second-in-command – and closest friend – snorted.

"It's still in your eyes," she said. "The thirst."

Had anybody else been speaking to her this way, she could have harshly chided them.

"I have no such thing," Juniper replied gruffly, knowing it was a lie.

It came from her mother's blood, she was sure of it: that deep, dark part of her that looked upon the battlefield and bared its fangs in joy. General Istrid was famous for being one of the only Praesi generals who fought in the ranks, and while the Hellhound believed that Marshal One-Eye's way was best there was a trace of that hunger in her. She'd dedicated her whole life to the art of war because there was something in her that sang, when she gave orders and the arrow loosed by her mind found the enemy's throat. *Orcs are born in love with death*, the old saying went, and what mortal lover could possibly compare? That was the boon and the curse of her people. Gods forgive her, but she was almost grateful to Heiress for having laid out such a fine banquet in front of the Fifteenth. When Juniper was done sinking her teeth into the Battle of Marchford, the blood spilled would splatter all over the pages of history. This she knew in her bones, like she knew there was no *after* the war for people like her. Just one battlefield after another until she went out in a glorious bloody

mess that would shake the pillars of the very Heavens. Some part of her looked forward to that end... but it would not be today. Her quiver was still full.

"The sappers have engaged the enemy," Aisha conveyed.

The Hellhound smiled, and nocked her arrow.

—

The bolt took the devil in the eye and it screamed. This wasn't one of the smaller ones so a good shot would do little more than tickle it, unfortunately. The beast looked like the particularly dumb offspring of a bull and gazelle, if both of those creatures had been morbidly obese. All in all, it was the size of a supply wagon and seemed intent on acting like a living battering ram.

"You really let yourself go, buddy," Robber informed it, "you should be ashamed of yourself."

He scuttled off inside the nearest house as another crossbow volley picked off a pair of the iron-hooked devils: he'd earlier thought that taking one of the ugly bastards in the head would kill them, but when the first volley had failed to make a single kill he'd been roughly disabused of the notion. Fill them with enough bolts, though, and they stopped moving. The horned devil bellowed and charged after him, ripping through the door he'd slammed shut behind him like it was made of wet clay. Cheerfully, the yellow-eyed tribune threw some poor soul's good tea set at the thing and legged it towards the window, jumping through and landing in a roll on the street as the shutters came apart.

"Bring it down," he ordered the two sappers awaiting.

The hammers fell with unseemly enthusiasm, breaking the keystones Pickler had marked and weakened a few days back: the house collapsed on top of the devil. It probably wasn't dead yet, unfortunately, since the roof had been mere thatch. Robber casually lit a pinewood match as the other two sappers threw oil jugs on the rough location of the monster, setting the whole thing aflame without missing a beat.

"How's the main street?" he asked.

"Demolition charges took one of the big fuckers out when it tried to pursue," Lieutenant Rattler told him, wiping her hands clear of the oil.

Callowan-made, those jugs. Sloppy work. If they hadn't confiscated them from local stocks he would have complained about the quality. He still would, of course, but he'd have done it *more* if the Fifteenth had actually paid for them. There was the pop of a sharper detonating in the distance, the sound of an

iron-hooked devil getting blown off a roof by his lovely minions. Goblins knew the passage of time more intimately than any human or orc could, and the tribune knew he'd been lingering where he stood too long. Already devils were honing in on his position, the dark failing to hide their silhouettes from his night vision.

"On to the next choke point," he ordered, casting one last look at the burning wreck.

This little kip of theirs was the brain child of Pickler and the Hellhound: goblin engineering married to the steel trap that was their legate's mind. Give ground one block after another, bleeding them dry all the way as they tore themselves to pieces going through the traps. Pickler's love letter to the sapper corps, he liked to think of it.

And who was he to refuse such a heartfelt confession?

—

"Shield wall," Nauk of the Waxing Moons ordered.

Clan names didn't mean much here, where the true clan was the number on the legion standard they fought under. His ancestry still followed him, though, the Rage always whispering in his ears and waiting for an opening to take hold of him. It had gotten stronger since his brother's death, fed on the grief and anger to become an even more ill-begotten thing. But there would be no anger today. He would take his revenge the Praesi way, cold and patient and utterly absolute. Nauk had thought orcs ruthless once, for they took lives the way other races took breath: he'd learned better since. The Tower was built on blood and hatred, a monument paved with a hundred thousand lives sacrificed at the altar of boundless ambition. How could a few corpses strewn across the Steppes ever compare? Nauk of the Waxing Moons wanted to sink his teeth into the enemy's flesh and feed until his belly was full, but Commander Nauk of the Fifteenth Legion would remain where he stood and see the Silver Spears ripped out root and stem. Another pyre for Nilin, one whose screams would be heard all the way to the Underworld.

The legionaries spread across the street and knelt as they put down their scutum against the cobblestones, spears jutting out in anticipation of the charge of the damned. Three rows of longer spears from the men behind them bolstered the wall, his legionaries calmly watching the cataphracts form in the field. The Legions of Terror were no match for the heavy phalanxes used by the Free Cities, but they had suffered the charges of Callowan knights for centuries and learned from the defeats. The Reforms had formalized the infrequent tactics some past Black Knights had used to good effect against the Order of the White Hand, standardizing the formation into the four rows of spear the Legions now used against cavalry. Horses usually refused to

charge a wall of spears unless they were trained destriers, but the mounts of the Silver Spears had been raised for war even before the demon had gotten its hooks into them. They would charge, Nauk knew. He was counting on it.

"Filthy abominations," Senior Tribune Jwahir spoke with distaste.

The Taghreb woman narrowed her almond-shaped eyes at the Silver Spears, resting a hand on the pommel of her sword. Half the reason Nauk had promoted her to Senior Tribune was that she had nothing in common whatsoever with her predecessor, whether it be in gender, race or even general disposition. Even in the light cast by the torches and bonfires covering the entire front that much was obvious.

"Soon to be dead ones," Commander Nauk growled. "They're taking too long to form up, Jwahir – send them an invitation."

The tawny-skinned officer raised a hand and the legionary behind her hoisted a banner. There was a rustle of movement behind them as two hundred goblins raised their crossbows, aimed and let the quarrels loose. Most of the monster-cataphracts were out of range, in Nauk's estimation, but the tip of their formation lingered close to effective killing range. The projectiles fell in an arc and most of them ate dirt, but a handful of cavalymen took hits. *No kills*, the commander assessed. Whatever demon buggery had mixed man and horseflesh had made it so that not even a headshot was enough to kill the abominations.

"Tell the Hellhound we'll likely have to put down the horses to kill the horsemen," he told the mage hovering behind him.

The bolts might have been mere fleabites, but they served their intended purpose: the Silver Spears were on the move. The damned mercenaries had placed their host as a mirror of his own, more or less. His own men were spread across the makeshift wall save for the main avenue the sappers had kept clear, where his cohort of four-deep spearmen held the ground from one side of the open ground to the other. Behind them he'd placed his sappers, though these ones were without munitions: fucking Robber's group had gotten what remained of those to deal with the devils. The monster-cataphracts faced his spears, all three hundred of them, while they'd split their infantry into two groups of two hundred and fifty on the sides. The men-at-arms moved first, charging forward without so much as a word.

"Mages," Commander Nauk barked. "*Fire.*"

Balls of flame bloomed all over the rampart, and the Battle of Marchford began in earnest.

"They're facing our spears with their horse," Juniper observed, frowning.

Aisha drummed her fingers against the table. "Could be the corruption scrambled their brains more than we thought," she said.

Neither of the two women expected the legate to reply. The Hellhound spoke aloud to focus her thoughts: Aisha's contribution was to serve as a sounding board by throwing around ideas to be adopted or dismissed.

"They have a surprise up their sleeves," the grim-faced orc decided. "Have Hune prepare the first fallback point."

The dark-skinned staff tribune drifted away to see it done. The Hellhound glanced at the latest report from the southern front, which had that little wretch Robber's casualties already nearing the forties. Not a sign of incompetence, though an untrained observer might have thought as much. She'd predicted heavier casualties when projecting the numbers for the engagement: a running battle through streets and alleys against devils was going to be a butchery, one way or another. The insolent twerp did have an almost providential sense of when to push and when to fold, though, which was why she hadn't protested when the goblin had been nominated for the action in the first place. There were few officers in the Fifteenth who'd be able to see their cohort split in half a dozen smaller forces and not lose track of most of them. Yet, aside from a line getting stuck in a dead-end and slaughtered to a man, the yellow-eyed tribune had managed to keep casualties to a minimum. *Good. We don't have the men to spare.*

Marchford, she'd grasped early, would be as much a battle of attrition as one of tactics. The Fifteenth could field a little above a thousand men, four hundred of which were sappers. Goblin munitions stocks were half-empty from Three Hills and there wasn't enough goblinfire left to deploy in any significant matter – not that she could, since it was likely to collapse Apprentice's ritual. What she did have was one of the Legions of Terror, arguably the finest infantry force to ever grace Calernia. That her forces were heavy on sappers was a minor liability, particularly in a siege setting: if she'd had only a single cohort of them she'd not have managed half as many preparations as she had.

What did the enemy have? Eighty-odd devils, most of which she could and had planned for. The threshold ritual had allowed her to dictate where they would enter the city, which simplified the matter even more. About eight hundred corrupted Silver Spears, an unspecified amount of which would be cavalry – three hundred as it turned out. In the upper reaches of the scenarios she'd planned for: the success margin for a retreat would be uncomfortably thin. In most sieges cavalry wouldn't have been a

factor at all and Pickler had suggested pulling down a few houses to fortify the main avenue into the west of city, the one linking to the road into broader Callow. It was an obvious weak point, after all. Even the Fifteenth had taken it when seizing the city. Yet Juniper had refused. If that gap was plugged there was no telling where the Silver Spears would strike: the tactical disadvantage it gave her was worth the strategic asset of being able to prepare a specific point for static defence.

"Robber's entering the last stretch," Aisha told her, having reappeared at some point.

"Good," Juniper growled. "Let's tidy up this Empire."

—

"I've come to a realization, Captain Clipper," Robber panted, casting a look into the alley.

Shit. Still a bunch of the fireflies and that scaled tiger monster that had ripped a man's head right off.

"And what would that realization be, Tribune Robber?" the captain replied, loading her lever-action crossbow.

The yellow-eyed miscreant cast another wary look into the alley. Where the Hells were his crossbowmen? At this rate they'd arrive too late. *Ah, well. Let's change this around a bit.*

"I'm actually invincible," he told the younger goblin, offering a vicious grin. "Truly, I've been ignoring the evidence for too long. It's the only explanation that makes sense."

"Oh Gods," the captain moaned.

She watched with horror as he checked his gear one last time, cleared his throat and ran out into the alley screaming at the top of his lungs.

There were five devils in there, and they paused for a moment at the sight of him. They were, he supposed, used to people running in the *opposite* direction.

"Well, this is awkward," the goblin tribune said slowly unsheathing said blade with his right hand. "I was aiming for that other alley, the one without all the devils in it. Do over?"

The scaled tiger glanced at the fireflies, then again at him. A heartbeat later it had already crossed half the distance separating it from the tribune.

"I hope you bastards have eyes," Robber spoke at the fireflies, tossing the brightstick he'd lit with his good hand while keeping them looking at the other.

The munition blew up right in the scaled tiger's face, but he didn't stick around to find out what happened – Clipper should have gotten moving while he was distracting them, so he legged it as fast as he could. Mage-takers, he discovered a moment later when one expanded into a pale-skinned silhouette with a wet squelch, did not actually have eyes. There went, like, half his arsenal. Still, he'd not made it this long in the Legions without stabbing a few people in dark alleys where no one could see him. Allegedly. He rammed his short sword through the devil's stomach, spun around and deftly planted his good knife in its neck. Well, Hakram's good knife. *Probably isn't very good anymore*, he decided, *that blood looks pretty nasty*. Still, being the exemplary friend that he was, he took the filthy murder knife, forced his sword out and ran for the next choke point. If there'd been no crossbowmen for this one, it meant some of his sappers had gotten their idiot skulls caved in. Hellhound would get snippy about it, no doubt.

He ran down the street and turned the corner without slowing down, sliding on the blood-slick cobblestone and reflexively dropping to the ground when he heard a goblin's voice yell "Duck!".

A hail of very late crossbow bolts passed overhead, puncturing the scaled tiger's body half a dozen times. The devil twitched, then dropped. Robber carefully picked up a loose pavement stone and threw it at the monster's head – it did not react. Nodding to himself, the tribune wiped some of the black blood off his face and took a look at his saviours: Rattler's boys, though not from the tenth he'd been expecting. That had unfortunate implications.

"First, I'm claiming full credit for this kill," he announced.

One of the sappers reloaded his crossbow and eyed his kidney area thoughtfully as the others loudly protested. It just warmed his heart that someone was keeping the old tradition of goblin field promotion alive.

"Second," he spoke over their treasonous whinging, "where are the others?"

"You're the last, sir," the shady one with the loaded crossbow said. "Captain Clipper just came through; the others are getting the reception ready."

Robber casually flicked dirt off his shoulder, smearing twice as blood over in the process.

"Well, gentlemen, let's get moving," he ordered. "As soon as you all thank me for saving your pitiful lives from that monster, anyway."

No wonder their infantry hadn't thought twice about charging a wall, Nauk thought as he watched another man-at-arms jump ten feet high and land on top of the fortification. The warrior was immediately caught in the chest by a burst of mage fire and went back down without so much as a sound, but others had managed to establish a foothold. The fuckers fought better than they had before the demon had touched them, fearless and immune to pain. His men on the walls were taking a mauling, even with mage lines backing them. Still, they were holding. By the edge of their teeth, they were holding. The orc commander didn't have any more time to grant the situation on the walls, because the enemy cavalry had finally stirred. They started at a walk, then a trot, and fell into a gallop twenty yards before reaching his line. At that point the ground gave under them, revealing the trick-ditch Pickler's lot had dug just for the lot of them. The full first rank went under but the rest pushed through with their lances up. That was when the crossbow volley hit them. Killed few enough, but it slowed them some before they rammed into his spearmen. Still, the crash of steel against steel was deafening.

"Shit," Senior Tribune Jwahir spoke feelingly as they both watched the first line of their formation collapse under rampaging hooves.

"Line's steady," Nauk disagreed, watching his legionaries waver and then solidify their formation.

Shock cavalry like lancers was good for exactly that: shock. After the initial impact they were just men on horses with an unwieldy weapon. Legionaries pulled down riders when they could and killed the horses when they could not, doing their grisly work in the dirt and blood under the torchlight. A messenger came from his back and leaned forward to speak quietly.

"Legate Juniper orders a retreat, sir," the man said.

"Now?" Nauk started, then frowned.

The Hellhound didn't give orders without reason, and she'd be well aware that he'd bleed men every step falling back to the next stronghold.

"Sound the retreat," he told Jwahir.

Before she could, though, a sharp uptick in screams drew his attention. The centre of his spearmen was being blown through like leaves, though calling cavalry what was achieving that would have been a misnomer. Some great hulking beast made of what must have been at least five horses and as many riders intertwined in a grotesque embrace was rampaging across the formation, picking men off with spears and ripping at them with too many hungry mouths. Nauk unsheathed his sword, pushing down the swell of Rage that ran through his veins.

"Sound the fucking retreat, Jwahir," he barked. "We're pulling back."

—

The Hellhound slowly sat down in the armchair someone had provided her when they'd taken the guildhall, but that she was only now using for the first time. She closed her eyes and allowed her fingers to clasp the – admittedly poorly – sculpted arms. She remained there for a long moment, feeling the weight of all her staff's eyes on her.

"Nauk's front is still salvageable," Aisha assessed. "And Robber's casualties still aren't as high as our worst case scenario."

Juniper did not answer. She simply allowed the images she'd been glimpsing all night to come together in her mind, forming the pattern of the engagement. Forces in motion, some set by her and others by the enemy. She could see where instinct would drive her opponent, to seek that decisive blow that would knock the Fifteenth out of this battle. And yet...

"And yet," she murmured, fangs glinting in the lamplight.

"Juniper?" Aisha said. "What will we do?"

"I'm going to take a nap," Juniper replied.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Should I just wake you when the battle's over, then?" her tawny-skinned friend asked sardonically.

The Hellhound smiled without opening her eyes.

"It already is."

—

The armoured boot came down and crushed the soldier's sword hand, then came down again and broke the bastard's neck. Nauk spat on the abomination and wiped his blooded sword one of the the still-blinking grown eyes.

"In *good order*, you weak-kneed prissies," he growled.

His men reacted like the sound of his voice had been a lash, tightening their line as they slowly backed away from the enemy. The Silver Spears infantry was being a hellish pain, what with the way they ignored battle lines and threw themselves into his formation with their weapons out. He'd ordered his legionaries into the testudo to take the hits, but some scraping of tactics must have remained in the cataphracts for they'd immediately

charged – the first time had cost him a full line before they'd drawn back, and that was without counting their bitch of a trump card.

"It's coming again," Jwahir called out, dripping blood through the openings of her helmet.

"MAGES, FIRE," the commander bellowed.

Four dozen fireballs impacted the massive abomination who'd wrecked his spearmen, blowing it back. It careened into a house, wrecking the wall and slowly getting back to its feet. Only a matter of moments before the cataphracts hit again, Nauk knew, but he grinned nastily under his blood-streaked helmet. They were just a corner away from the plaza now, and that meant... Just in time, Nauk's remaining legionaries fell into position at the head of the alley. The sounds of the cavalry's hoofs against the stone rang as they charged, but they did not impact his men. The ranks split smoothly in two, letting them through to meet the line that had emerged from the plaza: twenty ogres in full plate raised their warhammers and brought them down on the riders, killing man and beast alike in a single stroke. The legionaries closed around the riders as they tried to retreat, taking their revenge for lives already claimed.

A cry of warning came that the great beast was coming again but he was not worried because Pickler, beautiful glorious Pickler, had been the one to build this fallback point. The stone the ballista threw hit the monster right in its centre of mass, a textbook perfect shot. Horse legs and unwary necks broke, though the creature wasn't dead. It crawled forward and Nauk strode to it, elbowing aside any legionary in his way. At some point he'd dropped his shield but he had no need for it for this kind of work. The soldier closest to the abomination was run through by a spear a heartbeat after he reached the enemy, but the orc did not stop. He felt the Red Rage welling up in him, like a tide about to tip him over, but he did not fight it. He rode the wave, let its anger strengthen his limbs as he caught a lance about to skewer him and ripped it out of the rider's arm – the hand came with it, but what did he care?

In a moment of perfect clarity, Commander Nauk saw the hoof about to cave in his chest and *howled*, ramming his sword in the horse it belonged to. Hands and teeth were grasping at him but he climbed the abomination until he reached the summit of it. Under him was the roiling nest of corruption, flesh convulsing and pulsing like a repulsive heartbeat. With a laugh of heady battle-joy, he plunged the lance into it. Then he ripped it out and did it again as the abomination broke its silence for the first time, screaming through every mouth it had. Again and again he plunged the lance, until finally the monster stopped moving. Rising to his feet, covered in pus and blood, the orc howled at the night

sky and the red moon filling it. Seven hundred voices took up the scream and he bared its teeth and looked down at the remaining Silver Spears, watching them mass for another assault.

Hear that, Nilin? Isn't it better than a pack of mourners at a funeral?

—

Reception Alley, as the planning committee consisting of Robber and everybody within hearing range of him fondly knew it, was a cramped mess of wooden walls and stone foundations that had already looked about to collapse before the sappers got their grubby little hands on it. It was currently filled to the brim with devils trying to push their way through to the goblins shooting at them from the neck of the alley, most of them adding insult to injury with gleeful enthusiasm. He had trained his minions well, the tribune decided.

"Gotta be at least twenty in there," Lieutenant Rattler commented, spitting to the side as they both watched another volley take a jackal-faced devil in the throat.

A heartbeat later another quarrel punctured the thing's crotch with a dull thump. Robber made a mental note of finding out whoever had done that and giving them a commendation. It was the little things that made this career so much fun.

"I figure we'll have taken forty total, by the time we're done," the yellow-eyed officer replied.

And taken over twice that in casualties for their trouble, but it just wasn't a party if half the guests weren't dead on the ground by the end of the evening. Another of the mage-takers burst in the middle of his men but it was taken out within moments, long knives plunging into its flesh from every direction. Situational awareness was a natural goblin trait. They wouldn't have lasted very long as a species otherwise, either because of predators or each other. The single mage Juniper had assigned them for the scrying link was in the back and well-guarded, though the sight of an orc twice the size of the goblins watching over him had been most amusing. Once in a while the fireflies made a play for the man, but it turned out they could be swatted like actual fireflies when they were in that form. Who knew? Well, Apprentice knew. And had told them. Which was how *they* knew. Details.

"This is as much as we'll manage to sucker in," Robber said.

"They've gotta be making their way around by now. Light them up."

The thing about sharpers was that they didn't burn, not exactly. The alchemy as it had been explained to him released something called "kinetic force" which was obviously a made-up mage word. Still, all the heat that accompanied sharpers blowing came from

friction with whatever they hit: you couldn't set something on fire with a sharper. Not on its own, anyway. The only good thing about Marchford he'd found was that one of the main merchant guilds in the city had a great big stock of oil jugs that had been overlooked by the Countess when she'd stripped the city clean of useful stuff before bailing for her rebellion. About nine out of ten jugs from that reserve were currently inside the houses making up Reception Alley, along with all the sharpeners and smokers they'd been able to put aside.

Pickler was more interested in mechanics than munitions, but Robber himself had always been more of an explosion sort of fellow. Kept the blood flowing. So he'd designed the network of makeshift explosives that dotted the alley himself, and he watched with unholy pleasure as his minions lit up the initial charges and scampered away. One sharp whistle from Robber himself and all his remaining cohort bailed, giving ground to the devils who clawed their way in pursuit immediately.

The explosion still flattened him. He rose to his feet to witness a burning wasteland of rock and splintered wood, strewn with the cooked corpses of devils. Billows of toxic scalding smoke covered it all, too heavy to rise in the sky even with the wind trying to move them.

"I'm a little turned on right now," he admitted.

"Aren't we all?" Lieutenant Rattler spoke in a reverent tone.

He shook himself out of his reverie after a moment. Silhouettes were already prowling the smoke, hissing in pain but still pushing through.

"Full retreat, my lovelies," he called out.

Their part in this was done. By now Apprentice should have finished the second part of his ritual, the one that closed the threshold-free rectangle behind the devils. The door to retreat had been shut down, and now they were stuck with a real monster. He almost pitied the poor bastards: stuck in a box with the Boss and a hundred angry Callowans? *Someone* was going to have a bad time, and it sure as Hells wasn't going to be the Boss.

—

Fifty yards away from the burning, Catherine Foundling slowly unsheathed her sword.

Chapter 29: Stand

"There's a lot of people in the Fifteenth who remember Marchford as the day we proved we could spit in the eye of Hell and get

away with it. For me, though? It was the first time I ever put on legionary armour with pride. In the end, I think that might have meant more."

-Extract from the "Forlorn Memoirs", author unknown

The deserters, as I still thought of them, had painted over their shields. Even in the torchlight that illuminated the avenue where we stood, that much was easy to see. The red steel scutum were decorated with what looked like a golden noose. I'd already glanced several times at the one closest to me, and finally the light-skinned lieutenant by my side cleared his throat.

"Our company sign, Lady Squire," he said.

I frowned. "Name?"

"Lieutenant Farrier," he replied.

"And what does it mean, lieutenant?" I asked.

I wasn't smiling, and that was enough to make the dark-haired man wary. Blue-eyed and not much taller than me, he looked like the very picture of what I'd always been told the average Callowan was. I wondered what he'd done, to end up in the Fifteenth. Nothing nice, I imagined. *Lesser criminals don't get to avoid death row by enrolling.*

"Twice now, we avoided the hangman's drop," Lieutenant Farrier told me soberly. "The men decided we could use a reminder there won't be a third."

Laudably clear-thinking of them. As far as I was concerned, the formation of this company was the last chance they would get. Anything more would be detrimental to discipline and to be frank I'd run out of both excuses and willingness to keep them alive. I wasn't as patient or forgiving as I'd used to be. Whether that was a good thing or bad one remained to be seen.

"Not a bad sign, for a Forlorn Hope," I conceded.

He smiled, obviously relieved.

"Gallowborne, we call ourselves," the dark-haired man admitted drily. "Born of the gallows and headed for them again, should we falter."

A sardonic smile tugged at my lips. Callowan humour at its finest. In the distance the bark of sharpeners and the rumble of collapsing houses could be heard. There were fires too, lighting up the darkness like this was a summer festival outside the walls of Laure. The silence felt heavy and my leg was acting up again. The herbal brew I'd gotten from Masego had to be diluted, he'd told me, or it would dull my reflexes as well as the pain. I was

learning how to stand so less weight rested on my bad leg, but I'd never done this with armour before. I'd forgotten how heavy plate armour actually was, having become accustomed to wearing it.

"They're getting closer," I said, more to keep my mind on something else than from any real interest in a conversation.

Lieutenant Farrier spat to the side.

"I'll give this to the gobbos," he said. "They're nasty little pests, but they die hard and loud."

"Those goblins are giving their lives to save thousands of innocent civilians," I replied sharply.

The blue-eyed officer chewed on that for a while.

"They are, aren't they?" he finally said. "They might do it 'cause orders came from above, but that doesn't change what they're doing."

"Things change, Farrier," I spoke quietly. "Greenskins aren't the enemy anymore. The Empire isn't the enemy anymore, at least not the way it used to be."

The officer grimaced.

"Permission to speak frankly, ma'am?"

I didn't have to think much on that. Denying permission wouldn't end whatever opinion Farrier held, and I'd rather have it out in the open even if I didn't like it. Dissent forced underground could only fester.

"Granted."

"Fuck the Empire," he said, spitting to the side again. "Fuck the Tower, and fuck the *fucking* Empress too."

My brows rose. Certainly he wasn't the only Callowan out there thinking that, but I had to give him a measure of respect for having the guts to actually vocalize it that bluntly.

"I won't pretend I'm a good man, m'lady," he continued. "Done some things the Heavens frown upon, that's the truth of it. So did most the people here. But that don't mean the Praesi get to hand us a sword, order us to kill their foe and then pretend they did us a favour."

"You picked enrolment over hanging," I pointed out.

"If I were that principled a man," he grinned mirthlessly, "I wouldn't have had the choice in the first place. Or tried to run

afterwards. But there's something wrong with punishing a man for having done bad by sentencing him to commit more bad in the judge's name, you get me? Means the judge is crooked, and if they are why do they get to punish me in the first place?"

Because Praes is the law, I replied silently. Because Black and Malicia's rule might not be just, but it is orderly and in a lot of ways better than what came before it. Because even when our rulers were heroes with the Mandate of Heaven behind them, there were still taxes and corruption and meaningless wars. And if I have to choose between a ruler that is virtuous and one who can balance the national finances, I already know who I'll choose.

"This isn't a bad fight, though," he continued, shaking me out of my thoughts.

Farrier hesitated.

"And I don't know about tomorrow, but tonight? I like what this stands for," he admitted, lightly tapping the fifteen in Miezian numerals on his shoulder.

A thunderous detonation was heard in the distance and a cloud of smoke and fire went up in the sky. Robber's last hurrah before he went into full retreat. Slowly, I unsheathed my sword.

"Here they come," I said.

There was a bark of laughter from someone in the ranks.

"Again, huh?"

Grim laughter spread through the deserters.

"The knights will get the glory," someone sang.

"The king will keep his throne," more replied.

I knew the song. Every Callowan did, though the days where it was sung in the open were long gone. If the Kingdom had ever had an anthem, this was it.

"We won't be in the story

Our names will not be known," I joined in.

A hundred voices chorused, deep and thin and with accents from all over the land.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud,

It's us who holds the line."

Dark silhouettes appeared at the edge of the torchlight, studying us in silence. I felt it the moment Masego finished the last part of his ritual, the one that trapped the devils in here with us. A hard smile stretched my lips.

"The Princes take the Vales

The Tyrant is at the Gate

Our crops wither and fail,

The enemy's host is great."

Oh, this wasn't the first time devils tread Callowan soil. Our hatred for their kind was an old one, lovingly tended to over centuries of eastern armies bringing fire and brimstone to bear on our walls.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud,

It's us who holds the line."

The voices rang out defiantly into the night and I felt something well up in my breast, an old sentimentality I'd thought I'd left behind me. Pride in where I was from. Pride in what it meant to be Callowan, when all the surface trappings were stripped away.

"Man the walls, bare the steel," we sang.

"Hoist the banner, raise the shield

A free man's death they cannot steal

When we meet them on the field."

The devils came, crawling through fire and smoke. Wails and howls rose, coming from just out of our sight as they massed for their assault. The monsters had finally assembled all their strength, and with screams of twisted glee they charged.

"So pick up your sword, boy,

Here they come again

And down here in the mud,

IT'S US WHO HOLDS THE LINE!"

Like a wave of flesh and claws, the devils fell upon us as the last word of the old anthem were screamed at their ranks. Because that was the heart of Callow, wasn't it? Hard-eyed defiance even when the night was at its darkest. The shield wall behind me was forced back by the sheer brute force of the assault, but the deserters held. Jackal monsters, iron-clawed apes and a handful of horse-sized centipedes made up the first wave. The larger ones were lurking at the back, clever enough even in their frenzy to wait for an opening. The first devil to close on me was one of the ironhooks, as my legionaries had taken to calling them. It leapt over me, trying to make it behind the shields, but my hand struck out like a viper. I snatched it by the neck and let my Name flood my veins, *squeezing* as hard as I could. Its neck snapped like a twig and I casually tossed its corpse in the face of a jackal-headed monster to my left, the distraction allowing a legionary to thrust her sword in the devil's belly.

That was enough to earn me some attention, and one of the big ones came for me. It looked like a hyena, or perhaps the nightmarish take of a child on what a hyena would be. It ran on four feet, its whole veined muscular body covered with spotted closely cropped fur. Its front limbs were longer than the back, and turned into hardened horn that split into long claws that almost resembled fingers – but that was not the part that stilled me. Its maw made up most of the face, full of snarling caressed by a snake's tongue. Its eyes were pure white and filled with nothing but a frenzied desire for blood. The hide around its neck was massive, wrinkled and thick. Hacking through it would be difficult, I decided as I lowered my stance and brought up my sword. I'd have to go through the eyes or the belly.

Behind me the struggle of the devils against the shield wall was a deafening clang of metal and screams, but my men were holding. There was a cold anger in the Gallowborne, the weight an old hatred taught from the cradle and finally granted an outlet. My deserters greeted the host of Hell with steel and discipline, Callowan enmity forged into a sharp blade by Imperial drills. That brief thought was all the attention I could give them, for the devil was on me a heartbeat later. I took the impact but the monster was heavier than I'd thought: its mass was enough to blow me off my feet as it cackled madly. I bounced off the shield of the legionary behind me and landed in a crouch, my bad leg flaring up in vicious pain. The devil closed its maw around my sword arm, fangs grinding and sliding against the steel plate as it tried to rip it off. I cursed and took out my dagger, ramming it in the thing's eye.

That got it to back off and howl loudly in my face, knife still stuck in. I limped forward, because if the devil got momentum again this was going to get ugly. It reared back and struck with the horn-like claws: I hobbled nimbly to the side and hacked my sword into its ear, scoring a wound that let out smoke instead of

blood. It body-slammed me in the flank for my trouble but I was ready for it this time: my Name flared and I weathered the hit without flinching, my footing unimpeded. It made a noise of surprise and turned to bite again but I wasn't done: gathering the threads of power still wreathing me, I forced them around my fist and sucker punched the devil in the stomach with a snarl. It let out a wheezing gasp, the force of the strike tearing flesh and making it ripple.

"Welcome to Marchford," I rasped, ramming my sword into its other eye and placing a second hand on the hilt to heave and rip through until my blade tore through the mouth and came out smoking.

Its head almost entirely split in two, it fell to the ground twitching and lifeless.

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out," I finished as I slid my knife out of the corpse and back into its sheath.

While I'd been busy putting the devil down the deserters had been weathering the assault of the other monsters with admirable tenacity. I saw corpses on the ground and while the back of the company was a mess where the ironhooks had leapt over the shield wall and started tearing into soldiers, there was a pair of dead centipede abominations on the ground and more than a few jackal-headed monsters had been hacked to pieces by legionary blades. The shield wall was proving more than a match for the enemy's bestial fury, which meant it was only a matter of time until the large devils intervened.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the second wave moved. That there were so few of them left was a testament to both Pickler's talent for traps and Robber's fearless triggering of them: aside from the hyena beast I'd put down, only four of the massive devils remained. Two of them were made of the same mould as the skinless ape I'd once put down with Kamilah's line during my failed attempt to rescue the Fifteenth's wounded, and I knew full well how dangerous those could be. The other two I eyed disdainfully: some bull's ugly cousin and a lizard trying really hard to be a tiger. Those I'd leave to the Gallowborne, but the apes had a real chance of making the shield wall collapse if they managed to reach it. But that was why I was here, wasn't it? I limped ahead of the line of battle, ducking under a jackal's swing and rising to eviscerate it in the same smooth movement. It screamed from both mouths and I left it to cradle its guts, confident it would not trouble my soldiers. The skinless ape closest to me screamed his hatred in my general direction, but the other one was content to pass me by. That just wouldn't do. Shadows formed into a ball in front of my free hand and the projectile shot like a bolt, hitting it in the stomach. The muscles and bones shattered, maggots flying everywhere.

"It's bad form to ignore a lady when she asks for a dance," I called out.

If the screaming was any indication, I had its attention now. Lovely. They closed on me as a pair, yet another indication that these bastards had gotten old enough to actually think ahead – would it have been too much to ask to get purely animalistic devils? I'd have to send Heiress a strongly worded letter on the subject. My repertoire of insults in both Mtethwa and Taghrebi was an ever-expanding thing. The devils barrelled towards me like a pair of runaway carts and I could already hear the child voices they mimicked – Gods, *hopefully* mimicked – calling out their pleas. I stood my ground until the last moment slowing my breathing. I could no longer slide and run around my battlefields, I knew this. I was too slow, now. Mobility was no longer my game, and in brute force I could not match either of the monsters without drawing deep into my Name: something I was warier of than ever before. The well of power felt shallower now. Like it might run dry, were I careless enough.

I would cope. I still remembered the first time I'd ever seen Black and Captain fight, when I'd still been fresh out Laure and wet behind the ears. Captain had moved like lightning and hit like an avalanche, but my teacher had still won the spar. And he'd won never moving quicker than at a walking pace, letting his positioning and footwork carry the battle for him. I wasn't quite there yet, but that kind of fighting was not beyond me either. Especially against opponents still more mindless than mindful. There was a slight gap between the two devils, for they'd come at different angles. At the last moment I lowered my body and took a single step forward, letting the monsters pass me by and run into each other.

I smiled darkly as they spun into a tangle of limbs and shrill screams, pivoting to face them again. I let them rise without contest, knowing every moment I bought was allowing the Gallowborne to clear out more of the others.

"Lesson the first," I informed them. "The most important parts of fighting are distance and footwork. Let's try that again."

When they came for me the second time, after extricating themselves, they were warier. They did not charge – one tried to catch my sword while the other tried to slip behind my back. I sidestepped the grasping limb and claimed a trickle of my Name, just enough power to cover the edge of my sword and allow it to cut clean through the devil's flesh and wrist bone when I brought it down. Without missing a beat, I caught the maggot-spilling appendage and threw it in the stride of the devil charging at my back, taking another measured step right out of its way as it tripped and collided with its brethren. Down again they went, in a tangle of limbs.

"Lesson the second," I said. "I am not a swordswoman. Swordsmanship is the 'tame sport they teach noble children', or so I've been told. What I learned was to kill well and quickly, while giving as few openings as possible."

My lecturing did not seem very popular with my audience. Lots of screaming all around. It troubled me how easy I was finding it to ignore weeping pleas made in a child's voice.

"I'm hearing a lot of whinging, boys," I said. "Get your shit together, would you?"

Well, I thought as they charged like angry bulls the moment they got to their feet, *taunting works on devils. That's good to know.* I did not move, because moving out of fear was wasteful. I did not strike, for striking without purpose was meaningless. I breathed out calmly and watched them come closer with every moment, gauging the distances. The first one's fist grazed my shoulder as my sword curved, cleanly lopping off the devil's head. I spun to let the other one pass me by, reaching for my Name one last time. The shadow spear burst out and tore through its head before it took a fourth stride past me. A heartbeat passed, then the two corpses fell. I brushed a few maggots off my shoulder.

"Lesson the third," I spoke to the dead. *"Callow is under my protection. Tread its ground at your own peril."*

Behind me, the deserters let out a yell and advanced, encircling the last few remaining devils in circles of steel shields. They pressed forward close so that the monsters didn't even have room to move, swords thrusting into soft spots with vicious enthusiasm. I limped back to them slowly, sheathing my blade, and by the time I got there we were the only living creatures left standing.

"Wounded to the designated spot," I called out. "The rest of you, with me. We've still got one last mess to clean up."

For once, the cheers felt like they had been earned.

Chapter 30: Deliver

"Don't think of it so much as a fall, but rather as an opportunity to learn how to fly."

— Dread Emperor Venal, in the act of succeeding his predecessor

Of the original hundred I'd begun the evening with, there were barely forty left. More wounded among the missing than dead, but it was a hard man who could fight with an eye or a few fingers missing. There was only so much I could ask of anyone without a Name, and even with mine I was starting to feel the exhaustion

set in. I'd used too much power, I decided. I'd have to be careful about that in the future. Learn to use my Names in ways that burned through my reserves slower than the tricks my teacher had taught me and the ones I'd taught myself from that. I kept us moving as fast as could be managed, guiding us through mostly unfamiliar streets. The night was lit up in the distance by bonfires and mageflame, as clear a beacon as I could hope for. I'd trusted Juniper's plan to see us through this battle, and so far that trust had been rewarded. Anything that would tip the scales for the Battle of Marchford from here on out would be on my head: the Hellhound could forge me a chance at victory, but I'd have to be the one to wield it.

We started hearing the fighting long before we saw it. Screams, splintering wood and steel meeting steel. There was no other clamour like it in all of Creation, and there was some part of me that gloried in the sounds. Had Black seen that, when he'd chosen me? Had he stared into my eyes and glimpsed something in there, creeping under the ideals, that relished in the fight? It wasn't something I was proud of. I knew, deep down, that the sword wasn't enough to change the world. Not in any way that lasted. The real work began when the fighting was over, picking up the pieces and trying to fit them in a better way. *But, Gods help me, fighting's the part I'm actually good at.* I put the thought away: it wasn't a problem I'd solve tonight. If I didn't survive until morning, it wouldn't be a problem at all.

When we came upon the Silver Spears I saw with mild surprise that they had taken a *beating*. There were corpses in the plaza Juniper had ordered prepared and fielded with our single siege engine, but the mercenaries had been pushed back into the avenue. There we bare a hundred of them left. Nauk's legionaries had splattered the entire width of the road with the blood of their enemies: the only place their formation broke was when the shield wall had to split around the corpse of some enormous tangled abomination of horse and man flesh. Someone had apparently climbed on top and skewered it to death with its own lance. Weeping Heavens, my legion was full of crazies. What was Ratface feeding these people?

As if to make my point for me, up ahead a horse whinnied and there was a burst of cheers from Nauk's men. I tried to look at what was happening, but these were flat grounds and *every single fucking legionary* in my army was taller than me. I was one more incident like this from having a goblin with a stepladder follow me around everywhere, I really was. I let Farrier – the only remaining lieutenant in the Gallowborne, looked like – bring my company into the fold as I looked for a better vantage point. The ballista was on a platform and I could see Hune standing next to it from where I stood. So were Pickler and a handful of other goblins, but they paid me no mind as I approached: they were lining up their next shot, my Senior Sapper letting out a little

pleased sigh when the rock scored a bloody line of broken flesh in the Silver Spears.

"Lady Squire," the ogre greeted me as soon as I came close enough, fist thumping against her armour.

"Commander," I replied. "What's this with a horse?"

I scanned the battlefield even as I asked the question. Nauk's men had pressed by the large corpse, reforming a solid shield wall. The Silver Spear infantry was trying and failing to push them back, only retreating in time to let what remained of the corrupted cataphracts attempt charges. My other commander had their number, though. He was keeping his mages ready for those, drowning the tip of the cavalry wedge in mage fire every time they tried. I found the horse in question just as Hune offered me an explanation.

"One of the mounts was improperly corrupted," the ogre told me. "They've adopted as a... pet."

The last word was spoken with open distaste. Commander Hune had very steady notions about professionalism, which was half the reason she got on so well with Juniper. I watched as legionaries herded a horse without visible marks of corruption on it towards the enemy – it kicked their shields a few times but eventually ran away and bowled over a few of the men-at-arms, kicking one's head in and spilling dark fluids all over the ground.

"A pet," I repeated, not sure whether to be amused or appalled.

"Some of your former Rat Company men are calling it 'Magic Goat'. They seem to think this amusing, for reasons that escape me. Is it magical because it is not, in fact, a goat?" Hune frowned.

"You use undead goats *one* time and nobody ever lets it go," I muttered, dodging a proper explanation.

One of my legionaries tried to mount the thing when it escaped back to my forces, managing the feat for a solid ten heartbeats before it whinnied in distress and tossed him back into the ranks – he was caught by a dozen other men, landing unharmed. Still, there was only so much time-wasting I was willing to allow. Hakram and his picked line had been charged with keeping an eye on the back of the enemy to ensure none of the mercenaries split away from the mass and made a run for another hearth where they could disrupt the ritual, but if the Silver Spears all dispersed it wouldn't be enough. We hadn't anticipated the men-at-arms would be able to leap like they did, and against that the barricades Pickler had built to bar the surrounding streets would be useless.

Masego had recommended we evacuate the surroundings of all the hearths involved in the ritual and I'd signed off on that immediately, but even if there were no civilian casualties a third of Marchford would still be put to the torch by the magic going wild. We'd already turned Marchford into half a ruin, I'd rather it wasn't a smouldering one if I could avoid it. The Silver Spears weren't giving ground at the moment, though, even with their numbers running thin. Whenever their assaults failed they clustered around a cataphract in the back, one who never participated. It was more armour than man, the metal fused together seamlessly like a carapace – save for where the visor would have been, where it was twisted into a maddened grin instead. I sighed. I was going to have to take care of that one, wasn't I?

I was already gauging the fastest path to the front of the line when Apprentice stumbled onto the scene. The dark-skinned mage was panting and his robes were drenched in sweat, braids in disarray. A tenth of mages followed closely behind, in much better shape.

"Masego?" I prompted with a frown.

"Demon," he got out. "Demon's in the city."

My blood ran cold. I'd thought it would remain out in the hills, slowly spreading its corruption.

"How did it pass the threshold?" I asked.

The bespectacled man rested a hand on another soldier's shoulder, pushing himself up.

"It's *inside* one of them," he said, gesturing towards the Silver Spears.

Oh, Hells. That was why the grinning cataphract was staying in the back. Corruption spread almost instantly through touch, but given enough time just standing close to my men would do the trick. Even if it lost the battle, all it had to do was wait.

"*Shit*," I cursed, the expletive deeply heartfelt.

I closed my eyes and considered my options. The longer I let the demon work its power, the worse the situation got. How many of my legionaries were already beyond salvation? Yet the memory of my last fight with the creature remained fresh: I'd gone in unprepared and been effortlessly crushed. There was no longer anything glorious about any of the sounds of battle: every scream was a reminder that my men were slowly being ripped away from me.

"Are you combat ready?" I asked Masego.

He heaved drily, then wiped his sweat-dripping mouth.

"I'll manage," he replied.

I cast a look at Commander Hune, who'd been observing the conversation with an utterly expressionless face.

"Get word to Hakram," I ordered. "We're taking out the grinning cataphract."

She nodded and strode away without comment. The direness of the situation was not lost on her, it seemed. I waited for Masego to catch his breath another few heartbeats, then gestured sharply for him to follow. My Name was already roiling, preparing itself for the coming fight, and I could feel a pulse of responding power come from Apprentice. It felt like lightning and morning dew, something clear and crisp and deceptively cruel – steel under silk, the bite of it felt only too late. Fitting, for a man whose soft exterior hid such a deep well of merciless power. Soldiers split away for us without there being a need for orders, driven away by the old instinct branded into the minds of all the peoples of Creation: *Named are coming. Stand and die, run and live.* I spared no time looking at them. The horse from earlier whinnied plaintively.

"Butcher that beast," I ordered.

I had not Spoken, but my legionaries moved as if motivated by the crack of the whip. My eyes were ahead, fixed on the enemy. There were maybe a hundred mercenaries left, horsemen and men-at-arms mixed in an unruly throng. I felt Apprentice at my side, breath and pace steady as his magic crackled. The Silver Spears charged and I stilled my heartbeat, letting the world slow down around me. The muscles of the deformed horse at the head of the pack rippled under my dispassionate gaze, the tip of the lance headed for my throat. I considered it with disdain, stepping around the shaft and patiently placing my blade. Two impacts, and as I continued advancing the horse and the rider's heads tumbled on the ground. The wave of corrupted flesh and steel threatened to sweep us aside but Apprentice barked a word in some arcane tongue and a flash of fire race along the ground in long stripes, scattering the host. Neither of us broke our stride.

The grinning abomination was considering me. It came forward at a light trot, only charging when it was too close to change direction. Around us the flames formed a circle keeping us in and the enemy soldiers out, though they tried to push through the fire and fell away with shrieks. The demonhost wielded a lance but it used it like a staff, sweeping away paving stones as it swung the shaft at me. I danced around it, sword and dagger coming up to trace thin lines on the steel that bedecked horse and rider both. The corruption ran deep in this one. A lash of lightning left Apprentice's hands, coiling around the rider's

head and trying to drag him down. In vain: though the body convulsed, it seemed otherwise unaffected. The horse's hooves reared up to cave in the mage's head but bounced off a flat field of blue magic, shattering it in panes of light.

"There'll be *none* of that," I snarled.

My sword whipped to scythe through the horse's back leg, wreathed in shadows for the blink of an eye – it cut through steel and grinding bone effortlessly. Dark liquids burst out and the rider fluidly leapt down from the falling horse, landing on its feet. It turned to meet me without a word, unsheathing the longsword at its hip as it held its lance with the other hand. A shrill sound resounded throughout the battlefield and a ray of ugly black light pierced the horse's flank: its flesh and steel shrivelled away in a matter of heartbeats, leaving behind only an oily stain on the ground. The demonhost seemed indifferent to the loss, its perfectly still metal grin still in place. Its heels rose from the ground, leaving only steel-clad toes touching it, and with swiftness I had rarely seen surpassed it struck again.

My sword parried the shaft and I ducked under the sword stroke. Not quick enough: the sword shorn straight through the top of my helmet. I limped back as fast as I could, dagger hand clumsily tugging off the straps holding the helmet together. I shook it off and I fell to the ground. Apprentice cast a spell that rang like a thunderclap, an explosion of invisible force detonating right next to the abomination's head. It bought me a few moments, but besides forcing it to tilt back its neck there was no mark made by the sorcery. Masego had its attention, though. In a single heartbeat it had crossed the distance to the mage, sword shattering the restored blue field of light – though a second one came into existence it shattered it. It dropped the useless handle and caught Apprentice by the throat, ignoring the ring of fire that formed around its wrist and tightened instantly.

A legionary's shield impacted its side, knocking it back and breaking its grip as Hakram entered the scene. The orc let out a guttural howl, shield battering the demonhost down again and again in unrelenting assault. Unharmd for all that rage, it moved back as if yanked by the hand of some unseen god. Its toes were barely touching the ground, I saw, and no earthly muscles were lending it the speed it had displayed: an eldritch thing was moving it according to ways beyond that of Creation.

"Apprentice?" I called out.

"You are going to *burn* for that, abomination," the mage rasped coldly, ignoring me.

The gauntlets had left a pale mark matching the fingers on Masego's throat, but aside from that he seemed unharmed. I

worried anyhow, knowing corruption did not always have to be visible – but there was no time to worry about that now.

“Though I hunger I am never sated,” he spoke in Mthethwa, tongue cadenced.

The grinning demonhost moved to end him, but Hakram and I knew our work. Seamlessly I flanked the monster as Adjutant stood his ground, shield up and short sword in the middle line. The abomination did not turn to face me but it stomped a foot on the ground: wind howled and stone flew, forcing me back. Hakram, though? Hakram squared his shoulder and smiled a devil’s grin.

“Come on, you bastard. Here I **Stand**,” he laughed.

The lance, edge first, struck the scutum. Corrupted steel met the work of goblins and was found wanting, for in that moment even if all the Celestial Choirs had sought to move my Adjutant they would have found their strength matched. Again and again, with might that split the air and screamed havoc, the abomination tried to pierce the shield and its strikes pattered like rain on a lake of oil.

“Through grass and ground I crawl, devouring all I behold.”

As the words left Apprentice’s mouth I felt my Name howl for the first time since I had last matched my strength to the demon’s. It wanted vengeance, for an aspect stolen. It wanted to even a scale that could not be evened, but would settle for the harshest price that could be exacted. A single droplet of liquid shadow fell on my blade, the ripples spreading inky darkness until it had swallowed it whole. I sped through the rubble and rammed it in the abomination’s back, finally finding purchase as I punched through the carapace. With a great heave I ripped out my sword, dark pus falling to the ground in a hissing rain. I stepped away just in time.

“My blood knows the call, my flesh the craving. Nameless idolons, thieves of Heaven’s grace, **grant me flame.**”

Twin threads of flame sprouted above Masego’s shoulders, growing into great snakes of flame that obeyed this time without further command: their heads the size of a chariot, they fell like hammers on the form of the demonhost. Spellflame raged against an unseen resistance, melting away steel until it dripped on the ground and instantly searing the soft matter beneath. The spell had a hunger to it that had lacked at Three Hills, an eagerness to devour the enemy whole driven by Apprentice’s implacable anger. When the fires finally gutted out, a smoking carcass rested on the stone, trying to crawl back up. I silently stepped forward. With unforeseen violence the demonhost raked its mutated hands upwards, drawing lines on my cheek. I did not flinch.

"Wrong side of the face," I told it, still-dark sword falling down to end the fight.

The point of my sword thrust through the thing's head and into the stone beneath. Finally, it stopped moving. I let out a sob half relief and half surprise, power sifting through my fingers like sand. Hakram knelt at my side, his own legs shaking like leaves.

"It's still here," Apprentice said, voice bewildered.

My eyes flicked to the grinning abomination's body, but it was unmoving. *Oh, Weeping Heavens. It was never this one.* All the demon needed to spread its plague of corruption was time and touch. Why would it have picked the leader of the pack to serve as a cloak, blindly cunning as it was? Subtlety was ever the mark of their kind. There'd been one creature, harmless as it was, that my legionaries had been entertaining this entire fight. Taking as a pet, even. I turned and watched as the horse some poor damned soul had called the 'Magic Goat' allowed its stomach to open, spilling out guts that took the shape of a misshapen child.

"Gods save us all," I whispered as I finally realized how badly I'd been played.

How many legionaries had it corrupted with a kick or a ride, I wondered? To how many others had the plague spread as they stood should to shoulder in the shield wall? The demon crawled on the ground with limbs too small for its body of gore, twisting and turning against the stone. In the back of my head I heard a laugh that turned into a mockery we all heard, though the abomination had no mouth to voice it. It felt like hot knives ripping in my mind, scattering my thoughts. A heartbeat later, an arrow nailed one of its limbs to the stone. A one-handed man wearing clothes that were more decoration than true cover landed on the ground beside it. His spear rose and shone with white light as he offered a feral grin.

"Have at thee, demon," Hunter announced, as Archer knocked a second arrow.

I rolled my shoulders and gestured for my own Named to follow. Do or die, looked like. I was starting to hate how familiar that feeling was.

Chapter 31: Sleight

"Oh, give me a bloodthirsty, fire-and-brimstone conquering villain any day. It's the schemers you have to watch out for."
– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

Before I could properly process the sight of a hero actually being helpful for once, I felt the metaphysical equivalent of a hammer fall down over the entire avenue. The pressure lightened after a heartbeat but... No, lightened wasn't the right word. It had been *gathered*, into walls that sealed off the battlefield. I shot a look at Masego but he seemed as surprised as I was. Not his work, and neither of Lady Ranger's pupils could do magic as far as I knew. A consequence of Hakram's finally formed aspect? *Ah. Juniper.* Of course she had a contingency in case the demon actually showed up. We'd been fairly certain it wouldn't but the Hellhound wasn't one for leaving things to chance. The mages who'd helped Masego with the ritual had been given an additional set of instructions, was my guess. Why hadn't she told me, though? Because I'd been crippled? The thought made me grind my teeth, but I dismissed it as unfair. Juniper had not treated me any differently after my failed foray into dream visions.

So what was it about the nature of our opponent now that would make her wilfully keep me in the dark? It was a demon, and very dangerous. Not much of a justification there, even if it was a demon of – *corruption*. Oh. It was a given I'd be in the thick of any fight with the abomination, and the longer I stayed there the higher the chances I got corrupted. She hadn't told me the contingency plan because I might end up being the Fifteenth's opponent, before the battle was done. I felt a flare of grudging admiration for my grim-faced legate: she didn't balk in the face of bad scenarios. She prepared for them however she needed to, and if someone's feelings got hurt then so much for that. Still the ward, for I was pretty sure that was what it was, that had sealed off the avenue wouldn't be enough on its own.

Given enough time I might be able to break through it and Masego definitely could which likely meant the demon could as well. So it was meant as a containment measure, until the actual killing stroke could be readied. That might very well explain why I hadn't seen trace of Robber's sappers since their scrap with the devils, and I doubted this was the last contingency she'd had the Legion mages lay. Had Kilian been privy to all of this, I wondered? She must have been, as Senior Mage. I wasn't quite sure how I felt about that, but now was not the time to linger on the subject of my lover. Hunter had been – well, doing pretty good against the demon actually.

"Feel the might of my wrath, hellspawn!"

Could have done without the heroic declarations, but I wasn't about to look this useful of a gift horse in the mouth. The haft of Hunter's spear spun and caught the bloody form of the demon in the mouth, scattering the guts that made it up. Lack of head did not seem to hinder it: it grasped for the hero with misshapen hands, only for a violent explosion of blinding light to knock it back. I had to close my eyes, and even after that my vision swam.

Of the demon there was only a smoking smear on the ground left, but I knew better than to get my hopes up. Screams came from the few remaining Silver Spears as flesh and corruption began to flake away from them, sliding to the ground in trickles. From some of my legionaries too, I saw, and I found Nauk's eyes across the battlefield. Feeling sick in the stomach, I inclined my head in their direction and slid a finger across my throat. He grimaced but nodded – crossbow quarrels took the afflicted men in the back moments later. It didn't stop the demon. The flecks of flesh slithered across the ground until they formed some sort of foul pile, then began coalescing into a larger form.

"Apprentice," I called out. "We need options. Can you banish it?"

The dark-skinned mage shook his head.

"Not from inside the threshold," he said.

Bloody, Burning Hells. Had it planned that? Known that as long as we covered the city in a ritual, we couldn't trap it in a ward and force it back to the Hell it had escaped? Demons weren't supposed to be sentient but this one had proved capable of deception. *Then again, so are animals.* Anyhow, who knew what being bound to an Imperial standard for a few hundred years could do to a creature like that?

"What *can* you do?" I asked.

Apprentice let out a long breath.

"I can go all out," he said. "But you'll need to buy me time."

Well, Black had never promised this would be an easy job. I glanced at Archer, who'd allowed the string of her bow to slacken as she eyed the forming body of the demon. No immediate solution from there. I found Hakram already looking at me when I turned towards him and sighed.

"Fuck it," I said. "Not like running's going to help."

He snorted and we moved towards the enemy as one. Getting the child-form brutalized by a hero had apparently prompted the abomination to trade up for a larger model: the coalescing shape was easily the size of a two-story house. Not as thick though: two clawed legs with half a dozen articulations had already formed to support its spindly torso, but offhand I counted at least five arms aggregating flesh into long limbs touching the ground. That the fingers at the end of those limbs looked suspiciously human-like wasn't something I wanted to think about too much. At first I thought it wouldn't bother to make a head but when a long, thick strand of skin formed and started dangling from the torso I realized with disgust I'd been wrong. At the end of the strand a bubble of flesh expanded, sprouting eyes by the

dozens that were set in dark purpled flesh. Muscles popped from underneath the bubble and grew large horse-like teeth, because apparently it hadn't been looking nightmarish enough.

While Hakram and I moved, Hunter hadn't been wasting his time. The tip of his spear wreathed in light, he charged forward with a wince-inducing war cry. The hero scythed through one of the arm-limbs effortlessly, only to back away with haste when it started crawling close to his legs. While he put some distance between them, the demon picked up the limb with another arm and casually shoved it into what was likely supposed to be its spine. With a wet squelch, the severed limb re-joined the whole. *Well, that's going to be problematic.* We arrived at Hunter's side just as the abomination put on the finishing touches on its form.

"If we can hold it back for a while, Apprentice has something that will harm it enough for you to finish it off," I said.

"Squire," he greeted me with disdain. "You are only slightly less of a blight upon Creation than this thing."

"If I could cut off your hand twice, I would," I replied cheerfully. "There, we're friends now. Maybe we could attend the thing that wants to swallow all of the city?"

He sneered, but did not disagree.

"I'll take the lead, minion of Dark," he decided, and before I could argue he was charging again.

"You know he has another hand, right?" Adjutant said. "So technically..."

I didn't have time to reply because the fight had finally started again. Hunter, either entirely fearless or magnificently stupid, had slipped under the demon's jaw and was evading its limbs with impossible swiftness while scoring wounds on its abdomen. The light on his spear had dimmed, but heroic Names must have been painful to the monster: it was ignoring us and focusing on him. Even limping close to the demon was enough for me to feel the corruption wafting from it, creeping at the edge of my mind. I gritted my teeth and pushed back against the feeling, ducking under a flailing limb and hacking through the tip with my sword. The dark ichor that spilled from the wound blackened the steel, but I'd have to worry about that later – as long as it didn't touch my skin I should be fine. I could have used a helmet right about now, though.

From the corner of my eye I saw movement headed for Hakram's back, but there was a sharp whistle and an arrow took the corrupted man-at-arms in the throat – the mercenary collapsed to the ground twitching, then suddenly burst on fire. Archer has a few tricks up her sleeves, apparently, and we could stop worrying

about the last of the enemy host getting to us. Arrows kept singing as Hakram and I started methodically going for one limb after the other, one of us getting close enough to bait a strike and the other hacking through while it was overextended. Eventually it realized that while Hunter's spear was more painful the villains were doing more actual damage: it flexed its legs and with a push forced itself upright on two hands, spinning in a whirl of limbs that forced all of us back. Hunter got slapped away by a hand and the part of his bare chest it touched started warping but he screamed and another burst of violent light burned away the corruption, leaving only singed flesh.

The legs wriggled back into the demon's torso with a squelch and spray of ichor, bursting back out in front as it steadied its footing. I frowned. Staying too close wasn't an option for Hakram or me, given how much more vulnerable to corruption we were. Hunter would have to handle that part. What could we do that would actually hurt it, though? Three times we'd cut away an arm, only for it to shove it back somewhere more convenient to attack us with. I glanced at Apprentice, who fifteen feet away from all this was kneeling on the ground with his eyes closed and his palms held upright. *Gods Below, Masego, you could have at least gone further away.* Sweat was dripping from the bespectacled mage's forehead, and even from where I stood I could feel the weight of the power he was gathering. No incantation though. *Unusual, that.* How much longer would he need? There was no way to know for sure.

Wreathing my sword with my Name was no longer an option, both because I was running low on power and because I didn't like the looks of what the demon blood had done to the blade. *Don't think of this as a fight, Catherine, it's a puzzle. How do you solve it?* To keep it contained, its mobility needed to be hindered. Simply cutting off the limbs was useless. What else did I have in my arsenal? The avenue was thick with corpses and I could probably raise one, but given the nature of the demon that would be more liability than asset. I didn't know what would happen if it touched a corpse with my Name's power invested in it, or if it could reach through the strings I used to control my necromantic constructs. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. No obvious solutions, so I'd just have to try things. Hunter charged in again with a cry, so it was time for round two.

Adjutant moved like an extension of my body, always where I needed him to be exactly when I needed him there. Something about his Name, or had we simply been through enough battlefields together? I half-stepped out of an arm's way and scored a long mark against the side but it wasn't a strong enough hit to go through. No matter, Adjutant finished the work a moment later with the side of his sword, bringing up his shield to prevent the blood from touching him. The demon picked up the arm but disdained putting it back this time: instead it swung it at us

like a mace. I knew, even as I saw the hit coming, that I wouldn't be able to get out in the way in time. Not with the way my leg was hobbled. Hakram squared his shoulders and I felt his Name flare up, but it wouldn't be enough. I still remembered how drained using an aspect for the first time had left me: that he'd been able to fight at all afterwards was a testament to orc constitution. With a sharp whistle, an arrow fell on the mace limb. Larger than the previous ones, and spinning wildly on itself, it tore through the flesh and dispersed it like smoke before clattering uselessly against the ground.

Saved, for now. I glanced to where the Silver Spears had been and now stood only a field of corpses. Weeping Heavens, she'd killed at least forty corrupted men in less time than it took to say morning prayers. A good person to have on your side, Archer. Oversized fingers spread against the ground and pushed the demon up as it tried to swing its legs at Hunter, but the man deftly dropped to the ground and let the limbs pass above him. That was as much attention as I could grant the hero, because some of the other fingers weren't merely holding up our opponent. They were scrabbling around the broken pavestones and took a handful, carelessly tossing them in Masego's direction. I cursed: it had been too much to hope for that it wouldn't notice what was going on there.

I reached for the last scrapings of my power, formed a spear of shadows and shot it without missing a beat, bursting through a pavestone and clipping another. There were four other rocks flying and the same spinning arrows took out one, then a second, then a third – until the angle took the last beyond Archer's angle of fire. It would hit Apprentice in the head, I gauged. And kill him instantly. *Fuck, fuck fuck*– Adjutant stepped in front of Masego, shield up and legs spread. The impact caved in the shield and broke the arm behind it, but the orc remained on his feet and the stone fell to the ground. Teeth bared, Hakram ripped away the useless wreck of steel and forced back his arm in its socket with a horrible cracking sound. Gods, he hadn't even screamed or flinched. Just... taken it, and moved on. Slowly, Apprentice rose to his feet. I called out for Hunter to run and he did so without argument for once, scything the lesser half of an arm on his way out and leaping through a house's window with all the grace of a rushing bull.

Lines of flame rose from the ground into the sky from all over the city, too numerous to count. The threads of fire linked into a single point high above the demon and I finally understood what Masego had been doing. He'd broken his ritual, piece by piece, and taken the wild flames that would have exploded from the hearths as his own. *Usurpation is the essence of sorcery*, Apprentice had once told me, paraphrasing some Dread Emperor. He'd usurped his own work, and was now bringing its full strength to bear against our enemy. From the point where all the flames

had gathered an enormous pillar of flame descended, enveloping the demon in the blink of an eye. I'd half-expected the spell to disappear after a moment, but it kept on going. There was a strange sound coming from our mage's direction, and I realized with a start it was a laugh. Masego was grinning madly as he convulsed in laughter, the glare of the flames reflecting on his glasses as he peered over them at his work. His hands were thrusting forward, unmoving as the fire raged and waves of heat scorched stone and distorted the air.

How long we stood there, watching the son of the Sovereign of the Red Skies proving the truth of his lineage, I did not know. Long enough for my limbs to turn mellow as the stress of the fight left me, and long enough for Hunter to burst out of a different house than the one he'd entered and join us. Archer leapt down from her perch moments later, eyes wary.

"Will that kill it?" she asked.

I chuckled tiredly. "Well, it probably won't be moving for a while. We'll still need Hunter to finish the fight: I don't think Masego will have enough juice left to cage and banish it after that."

She arched a fine eyebrow.

"That was an option?"

"From what I understand," I said, "our chances of managing to trap it if it saw us coming were... not promising. This is probably as good as the Fifteenth can reasonably have expected this fight to have gone."

Hunter himself was studiously ignoring us, and I returned him the courtesy. He'd been eager enough to attack so far, I had no doubts he'd finish the monster off when the time came. Hakram was more important to me, and I had to limp as quick as I physically could to catch the orc when he began to collapse.

"I think I'm done for the night, Cat," he rasped.

"You did good, Hakram," I murmured, gently setting him down against a wall. "Better than anyone had a right to expect."

"I-" he started, but exhaustion caught up with him.

His mouth closed and unconsciousness finally took hold of his body.

"Steady fighter, this one," Archer commented.

"The steadiest," I agreed softly.

Masego's spell showed no sign of thinning. I limped to his side and put a hand on his shoulder.

"How much longer?" I asked.

He remained silent for a moment. At the edge of my sight, Hunter raised his spear – immediately, my hand dropped to my sword and I cursed myself for having ever sheathed it. I'd thought the hero too straightforward to turn on us, but now that the battle was done he must have thought he could take us out when weakened and then take care of the demon on his own. Shit, what side was Archer going to take? She was the least tired among us.

Hunter spat blood, and the demon's hand finished ripping its way through his chest.

It looked almost human now, though naked and with unsettlingly large eyes. Archer's retort hit him in the throat but it didn't even seem to notice. It withdrew its hand from the dead hero and tossed him at Masego, breaking the mage's concentration – the column of flame immediately rippled, then went up in an explosion that flattened all of us to the ground. I forced down a scream of pain as my bad leg snapped at an angle but desperately scrabbled back to my feet just in time to see the demon go for Apprentice. The same blue panes of light that had stopped the corrupted monster earlier materialized in front of the mage when the abomination leapt at him, holding it at arm's length as its caressed the magical shield. Masego grunted as I moved to flank the demon, the shield light bursting and throwing it back. The impact had wiggled the arrow in its throat, spraying blood in an arc as it landed fluidly on its feet.

A single drop landed on Apprentice's left wrist. Immediately he brought up the other hand, the tip of a finger glowing red-orange, and with a hoarse scream he cauterized the skin. Would that be enough? Shit. It had to be. I heard Archer unsheathe her blades and the demon lazily turned to look at me. It took a step, and then stilled. The sound of hooves against stone was heard in the distance, coming towards us from where the Silver Spears had once stood. The pace was unhurried, like the rider had all the time in the world. I let out a breath of relief. *Black*. My teacher had come for us. Through the smoke and dust kicked up by the breaking of Masego's spell, a single silhouette rode. A cage of bright red and green flames formed around the demon, spinning slowly at first and then quickening until it took the shape of a whirling cone and then *burst*, tearing into the sky so high the whole city must have been able to see it. Behind it, no trace of the demon remained. The horse was reined in twenty feet away from us, and finally I was able to make out the rider.

"Well," Heiress spoke with a pleasant smile. "Quite a mess you've made here, Squire."

Chapter 32: Draw

"You have to enjoy life's little pleasures, like lazy mornings and strawberries and invading Callow with an invisible army."

– Dread Empress Malevolent III

A heartbeat passed as my brains struggled to cope with too many surprises in a row – I forced myself to focus on one at a time. Had Heiress just casually banished a fucking demon? No, that couldn't be. I didn't even think she was a mage, and even if she was there was no way a girl barely older than me had that much power at her fingertips. *Apprentice* couldn't even do that, and sorcery was at the heart of his Name. Black I could see pulling out something from his apparently bottomless bag of tricks, Warlock probably and Malicia almost certainly but Heiress? No. I'd missed something. My eyes drifted to my rival's saddle, noticing she was resting her gloved hand on a long wooden haft. Old wood, with fresh new runes carved into it. It took another heartbeat before everything clicked into place. Triumphant's demons had been bound to the standards of her Legions, Masego had told us. *She never let it loose. She let it out, and after she got what she wanted she just... popped it back in.* Heiress' irritatingly perfect face was the picture of friendliness, but I thought I saw a glimmer of vicious amusement in her eyes when she met my stare.

"Would I be correct in assuming she's the person responsible for the demon running around?" Archer asked in a very, very calm tone.

"That's the one," I confirmed.

Heiress' face painted itself with what I would have believed to be genuine surprise, had I not known who I was dealing with. I couldn't make out too much of her in the dark, but what I did see was perfectly groomed. Not a speck of dust on her polished steel scales or that rather nice green shawl wrapped around her neck. Even the horse was spotless, and a beautiful beast besides: all grey, and Callowan stock too.

"Is that how you'll be trying to get out of this grave you've dug?" the aristocrat asked. "By pinning the blame on me? We both know the Silver Spears would never have come over the temple holding the demon, had you not pushed them so relentlessly after your victory."

"Oh, you *bitch*," I replied.

"Uncouth language only betrays your lesser breeding," she informed me with a sneer. "I will not take the fall for you, Squire. You made the decision to hound their retreat out of petty spite, I am told. Something about the death of a Tribune Nilin?"

My fingers tightened around the grip of my sword until I felt them turning white. I'd thought I knew hatred, from the days where I'd lived under the thumb of Mazus. I found now I'd been mistaken. The Governor grinding his heel over the city's throat was an impersonal sort of attack, directed at a people instead of my own person. This? This was personal.

"Well, Miss," Archer smiled. "You and I seem to have an account to settle. Do try to struggle, it'll be that much more satisfying."

My eyes remained on Heiress' gloved fingers, watching them drum absent-mindedly against the haft of wood. I could see the place where metal rings had once bound the cloth part of the standard. The dark-skinned villain met my eyes again, the implied threat perfectly clear. *I let it out once. If my life is in danger, I might just do it again.*

"You'd be the representative from Refuge, yes?" my rival said.

Archer flicked her wrist, slowly spinning the longknife in her hand.

"Could be I'm just a concerned citizen," she replied.

Heiress cocked her head to the side. "I'm given to understand that you were sent to smooth over a little diplomatic wrinkle with the Tower. I wonder what the consequences for your mistress would be, if you attempt the murder of a Praesi aristocrat in broad daylight?"

"Oh, I won't be 'attempting' anything," Archer chuckled. "Anyhow, I've got doubts anyone here will bear witness for your corpse afterwards."

Why had she forced the demon back in the standard? I allowed their words to drift past me as I put all my mind to figuring that one riddle out. If she'd waited a few moments longer, it might have killed me. Or corrupted me, at which point she'd have an excuse to put me down that not even the Empress could dispute. *Her victory condition for this does not involve me being permanently out of the game.* What was she actually after, then? Crippling the Fifteenth, maybe. *Or she might have been trying to avoid something that would cause her to lose.* If I'd been dead or corrupted, there were decent odds the defence of Marchford would have collapsed. At which point the entire population and the remnants of a legion would have ended up corrupted puppets. And Black would have killed her outright for it, because she'd have been responsible for an existential threat to the Empire.

By stopping now, the only strength on the field to have been damaged was mine. The Fifteenth was in shambles, I'd damaged my Name irreparably and she could just stroll in at the end of the

fight to claim credit for the "victory". It was a twisted, labyrinthine plan that had at least half a dozen possible points of failure I could name off the top of my head. The very kind of plot the Praesi brand of villains loved the most. The enormity of what she'd just done slowly sunk in. She had, when it came down to it, used a genuine threat to Creation itself as a fucking hunting hound to damage my position. Hundreds of soldiers, *my soldiers*, had died just so that smiling failure of a human being could hobble me for the rest of this war. I took a long breath. Archer was right: Heiress didn't get to walk away from something like this.

"Apprentice, you still with us?" I called out.

"Still alive," Masego replied through gritted teeth.

"If you had the standard a demon is bound to, would you be able to use it?" I asked, glancing at the bespectacled mage.

"Easiest thing in the world," he replied, baring his teeth at Heiress.

"I'll need you to hold off the demon for a while," I told Archer. "This is going to get messy."

The ochre-skinned woman nodded sharply, leaning forward in anticipation. Heiress cleared her throat.

"As to your earlier point about witnesses, Envoy," she said, idly waving her hand. "I would dispute that statement."

The still-lingering cloud of dust and ash dispersed under an unseen wind. Magic, I knew instantly. Without incantation, which was even more worrying – although not as much as the sight now revealed. Lightly armoured men bearing large oval shields and spears, quietly marching down the avenue. Numbers were hard to gauge, but I could see them spreading out in the distance beyond how far I could see. *At least a thousand*. Behind me I heard Nauk calling for my legionaries to form up in proper ranks. Gods, I'd misunderstood her endgame. She didn't want us mauled for a long-term advantage. She wanted us as weak as possible before wiping us out with her own men, using the excuse of possible corruption as a political shield afterwards. And I'd danced to her tune the whole time, never knowing who was playing the lute. I reached for my Name, finding the well still near-empty. *Might be able to pass over that if I tap into Struggle*.

Alarmed yells started coming from the back of Heiress' column a moment later. Out of principle I refused to try to push myself up on the tip of my toes to catch a glimpse of what was happening – instead I looked at the aristocrat, and for the first time a flicker of doubt passed through her face. The crossbow bolt passed three inches away from her mount's head, clattering on the

ground, and I turned to watch Robber scuttle down from a roof to the left like an ugly leering green spider. His sappers lined that entire flank, crossbows loaded and ready.

"Evening, Boss," he said.

"Tribune," I replied, schooling my face to make it look like I knew exactly what was happening.

I'd gotten a lot of experience at that since I got put in charge of a legion.

"The Callowan volunteers are in place," he reported. "Learning a bunch of Proceran looters were visiting their home got them motivated good and proper."

Half of Heiress' army had been made of Proceran light infantry, I remembered. Robber hadn't been at the briefing where General Sacker had told me that... but Juniper had. *Three cheers for the godsdamned Hellhound, may she ever keep one step ahead of our enemies*, I thought, turning to face my opponent.

"Looks like you called it off too early," I told Heiress.

"I have numbers on my side," she noted in a neutral tone.

"Lady," Robber broke in with a malevolent smile. "We just fucked up a bunch of devils and most our number in mercenaries with a demon's hand shoved up their arse. Chewing up your pretty lads will be light exercise before we turn in for the night. But please, doubt me. *Try us.*"

I laughed. "You heard the goblin, Akua," I grinned. "Take out your sword. Last time we had a chance to dance, you legged it before we got to the good stuff."

Heiress' face went blank and she remained silent for a long moment before she sighed.

"I suppose now and then one must be willing to settle for a draw," she said.

"I still say we knife her and put the head on a pike," Archer growled.

"You kill her now and the Empress might have to declare war on Refuge," I admitted. "She's not without backing."

With another growl, the Named shoved her longknives back in their sheaths and strode away. My rival seemed about to add a pithy comment to the situation, but before she could someone tossed an empty bottle at her head. Or tried to, at least – it missed by a solid three feet.

"Boooo," the Wandering Bard yelled. "Boooo, villains, boooo."

Of course Almorava would show up. This night just wouldn't be shitty enough with the mouthy heroine making an appearance. Evidently the godly quota for screwing me over this month had yet to be filled in full. *I bet she practiced the booing, too, there's no way it could sound this excruciatingly obnoxious otherwise.*

"I paid good money for this seat," she called out from the ledge where she was seated, surrounded by a line of my sappers. "Show me some blood, or at least lose some clothes!"

The olive-skinned heroine still wore the only outfit I'd ever seen her in, garishly coloured silks that were just a little too wide for her. The sleeves were longer than her arm and larger than her wrist, flopping around as she gesticulated. I could make out a few stains on her clothes, and I'd been a waitress long enough to recognize the effect of liquor spills on nice garments. Sloppy.

"Lieutenant Rattler," Robber gasped. "What's the meaning of this? Why is that woman's kidney going unstabbed? This is against all we stand for."

A female goblin – Lieutenant Rattler, I assumed – saluted sloppily.

"I'm afraid she bribed me, sir," she replied.

"We don't take bribes," the yellow-eyed tribune chided her.

"I'll cut you in for half?"

Robber turned towards me. "Protocol was followed, Boss."

I knew from experience that actually getting the Bard to leave was next to impossible, but at least my soldiers were making pocket change out of her presence. That was... a win, maybe? Having to ask myself that question at all honestly felt like a loss of its own.

"You again," Heiress spoke with distaste.

"Oh, it's... Inheritor? Successor? Legatee, maybe?" Almorava mused. "I'm sorry, you just weren't that interesting of a person. Anyhow, nice to see you again. Watcha been doing since you let that demon out?"

At the edge of my vision I saw Archer still for a heartbeat before she continued walking away. Most of my legionaries weren't in hearing range of the Bard's declaration, but those that were eyed Heiress like they were measuring where to slide the knife in. The knowledge of exactly who had caused our demon troubles

hadn't been spread outside of the Fifteenth general staff, but now it was a given all of my soldiers would know who to blame before dawn rose. Godsdamnit. I hadn't had a reason to keep that morsel under wraps aside from not seeing a reason the information should be spread, but Almorava throwing it out there was bad news. *She* definitely had a reason, and I doubted it was to my benefit.

"Unusual, that your accusations and that of a known heroine coincide," Heiress spoke, keeping me in her peripheral vision as she faced the drunken minstrel. "It smells of... untoward sympathies."

"I'd watch my mouth, if I were you," I replied cheerfully. "Accidents happen all the time, on campaigns."

"You kinda grew into the villain thing, didn't you Cat?" the Bard mused. "I mean, you've got the distinctive wound down with your limp. You've already got a notable tic with the clenching fingers thing, so basically all you need now is a catchphrase and you're set."

I did actually have one of those. One that had been crafted in response to something said by a hero, even. Not that I was about to admit as much to the bloody pest.

"You'll probably even manage to get a few atrocities under your belt before the war's over, if your friend here doesn't beat you to them," Almorava continued, toasting me with a half-empty bottle of rum.

"Ah, heroic posturing," Heiress said softly. "Considering the behaviour of your little band of murderers in Summerholm, any talk of 'atrocities' coming from your mouth is the height of hypocrisy."

"Says the slaver," the Bard smiled.

"I employ only free men," the aristocrat sneered.

"Well, at least you fed them properly after buying them," Almorava conceded. "Truly, you are the cream of the scum of Creation."

Huh. So the Bard could get under Heiress' skin almost effortlessly. That was good to know. Exploitable right now? Unlikely. The Ashuran had no real combat abilities, as far as I knew. In a way that made her sudden presence more worrying: physical assault I could prepare for, but the subtler forms of Name warfare were largely beyond me. I could try to slit Heiress' throat while she was being distracted, but I was nigh-powerless while she was at full tilt. No to mention I wasn't sure exactly what the consequences would be, if I managed it. A fresh battle

with her mercenaries, possibly, and for all that I'd pretended to be unmoved at the idea I really did not want to pull that trigger. My men were exhausted and the volunteers were not real soldiers – maybe we'd win, but the odds weren't much in our favour.

"Why are you here, Almorava?" I asked instead, playing for time.

It should keep her distracted long enough for the sappers I was pretty sure Robber had discreetly mobilized to make their move.

"Why are any of us here, Squire?" she wondered waving the now almost entirely empty bottle around. I hadn't even seen her take another swig. "Interesting question. Well, for you it's that you think you're doing the right thing. That road to the Hells you're paving is looking real good these days. Your fellow villain thinks she is the right thing, and is hilariously mistaken about that in pretty much every way that matters. As for me, I'm just having a gander."

"One of these days, you wretched little foreigner," Heiress said pleasantly, "I am going to have your mouth sown shut."

"Everyone here who was actually born in Callow, raise your fucking hand," I spoke sweetly.

Robber raised his hand.

"I feel that, spiritually, I have told the truth," my tribune offered when I glared at him.

"The standards for Legion discipline have truly grown lax if you allow this kind of backtalk," Heiress scoffed. "A trickle down effect, I imagine."

"Oh, you don't want to start going down that road," I replied with bared teeth.

Almorava suddenly gasped, killing the tension before it could escalate.

"Clatter, you've betrayed me?"

"Rattler," the sapper reminder her. "My name is Rattler. Also yes."

"I thought we had something real," the Ashuran deplored.

There were a series of sharper detonations under the roof where the Bard was seated, the tiles collapsing as a neat hole and the heroine dropping in. A long moment passed until another goblin popped his head out from the house's front door.

"No body, ma'am," he reported.

Yeah, I hadn't really counted on one. At least she was gone. From the corner of my eyes I watched Lieutenant Rattler bite down on a silver coin and curse when it bent easily. Counterfeit silver, I realized with an involuntary twitch of the lips. She'd bribed my sappers with counterfeit silver, and not even a good fake.

"We appear to be done here," Akua decided, turning her horse around. "My host will be occupying the Countess' manor, as it is the only lodging in this... backwater befitting someone of my rank."

"You do that," I grunted, watching her ride away back to her troops.

I waited for her to be out of hearing range.

"Robber?"

"Boss?"

"I want that manor on fire before she ever sets foot on the grounds."

"Gods, I love this outfit," the yellow-eyed goblin confessed.

Chapter 33: Clean-up

"Of course I don't step on people's throats using my own heels. Have you seen how gorgeous these boots are? I'm not getting blood on these beauties: it takes at least two princes to get the right amount of skin, and duke leather just isn't the same."

– Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner

We'd had to put the entire main avenue to the torch, no two ways about it. While Robber took care of scorching the earth where Heiress wanted to make camp, my men were stuck with the clean-up. Corpses of my legionaries and the Silver Spears both were stacked on great pyres that would burn until morning. I had one made for Hunter alone, since he'd earned at least this much from me. Anyhow, I suspected Archer would want his ashes to bring back to Refuge, whenever she came back. Necromancers could make some truly terrifying things out of the ashes of a hero, with a little time and imagination, and since I had none of those in my employ better they went far beyond the reach of my enemies. Handling the corpses was grim work, but it wasn't the worst of it. Apprentice still had enough wits about him that he could serve as a detection device for corruption with the right spell, so I had Ratface appropriate a guildhall and rotate all legionaries who'd been within sight of the demon through it.

A dozen times, I patted a man or a woman who'd served me with nothing but loyalty on the back and sent them to a backroom where a sword was driven through their back.

I would have done it myself, felt like I *needed* to, but I was too godsdamned tired not to screw up the job. Of all the things to have happened tonight, that one left the foulest taste in the mouth. It was Sergeant Tordis who ended up bloodying her hands, though most of her line stepped in at some point or another. Casualties to demon fuckery were less than I'd feared: the trick it had used to make a new form seemed to have killed most of the affected. There was, of course, another problem. Apprentice himself might have been touched by corruption, and could not be relied on to check himself. None of my other mages knew the spell, and Masego was the only one who could teach it to them. I had records kept of all legionaries who'd been exposed to the demon even after the... purge, just in case. I'd need to have them looked over by another mage as soon as I could manage. I could feel myself falling asleep on my feet, but there was still too much to do.

Hakram wasn't waking up, so I'd had him moved to my rooms until he was back in action. My healers assured me this was a case of pure exhaustion, and for what it was worth Apprentice cleared him of any trace of corruption. Coming into his aspect when in range of the demon hadn't had the consequences I feared, much to my relief. *Of course, unlike me he didn't try to fucking force it.* Robber came back half a bell later, as I dipped a torch in bucket of oil standing in a darkened street.

"Boss," he greeted me, creeping out of an alley on silent feet.

I'd heard him coming but I was too tired to bother. I shook off some oil onto the paving stones and grasped the haft of the torch more firmly.

"Report," I ordered hoarsely.

"The munitions we had stocked in the manor went up by accident," he lied baldly. "By the time Heiress' boys got in place to put it out, the place was a burnt-up husk."

I smiled thinly. There was no pretending I hadn't given this order out of pure spite, but I did not regret it. Akua had crossed a line by meddling with demons, by setting one on my legion. The only reason we had a truce was that forcing a battle with her right now was too risky.

"Tribune, listen to me closely," I rasped. "As long as those fucking Proceran mercenaries and their paymaster remain within a day's march of us, there will be *accidents*."

The moon cast its light on the sapper's face, sharp needle-like teeth and malevolent yellow eyes making my soldier a scarier sight than the devils ever had been.

"There's all sorts of accidents," Robber mused. "I wonder what kind might happen to them?"

"Supplies will be poisoned," I ordered harshly. "Beasts of burden will be crippled. Any men who wander the city alone or in small enough groups will end up dead in an alley. If they so much as stack two stones on top of each other, I want them pushed down and on fire."

"Hare anulsur," he murmured in Tahreb.

War of vultures, it meant. The tribes of the Hungering Sands had never matched the Soninke kingdoms north of them in numbers, but never once had they been successfully invaded: Soninke hosts wandering into the desert found only poisoned wells and nights full of knives, until all that was left of the enemy was a trail of corpses for the vultures. He'd understood my meaning perfectly.

"We've been at war since the moment she let the abomination out," I snarled. "Time we started acting like it."

There was no need to tell him not to get caught, and that if he was I'd have to deny I'd ever given him this order. Goblins understood the ways of quiet war better than humans ever could. With my free hand I opened the shutter to the only lantern lighting up the street and used the candle inside to light my torch. With heavy steps I walked to the pile of firewood Tordis' line had stacked up, engraving the faces of the twelve legionaries on it into my mind. *Gods, they look so young*. I threw the torch.

"Your deaths are debt," I whispered as the flames spread. "And I will have a long price for them. I cannot give you much, where you are going, but I can promise you that."

I turned away, Robber falling in behind without a word. Dawn was but a bell away, and I needed to get some rest: Creation wouldn't stop spinning just because I was exhausted.

—

My entire body ached when I woke up.

All available beds had been taken by my wounded, so I'd ended up passing out on a chair in one of the empty rooms of the Fifteenth's command centre. I tested my bad leg by putting weight on it and had to bite my lip to stop from screaming. *Fuck. Well, I won't be running any time soon*. My armour was in a messy pile

on the other side of the room but putting it back on seemed like a masochistic endeavour, so instead I carefully rose while putting as little weight as possible on my wounded foot. I felt filthy, and probably smelled like it too: a mix of old blood, sweat and grime. There was no washbasin, unfortunately, and going on a quest for a bathtub was a luxury that would have to wait. The only upside to how I felt was that I was too tired to be hungry. I bent over with a hiss to pick up my sword belt and strap it on, tightening it sloppily. My ponytail had turned into a tangled mess while I slept, but that was nothing new: at least it had stopped growing since I'd become the Squire.

I pushed the door open and limped into the wider chamber. There were only a handful of officers there, spread among a few tables and talking in low voices. Through the windows in the front I could see the sun had risen, and that was as much as I took in before a hush fell over the room. Every single legionary was looking at me in utter silence. I kept my face blank, unsure how to react. It wasn't fear or resentment I saw, but something else I couldn't quite identify. Aisha's voice rang out suddenly.

"Back to work," the Taghreb girl barked. "Azim, put the herbs in the pot. If I catch any of you gossiping you're getting a double shift helping the sappers."

Aisha was perfectly groomed, looking like she'd just walked off a parade ground. It wasn't because she'd not been in the thick of it, because some of the other staff officers I could see were looking distinctly haggard. I even smelled a touch of perfume on her as she came closer, offering me an arm to lean on. I pushed away the gesture a touch too harshly, regretting it immediately as I hobbled to a chair on my own. She didn't seem particularly offended, at least. I suppose that being as close to Juniper as she was, she knew a thing or two about dealing with rudeness.

"Aisha," I grunted. "What time is it?"

"Half past Dawn Bell," she replied, sitting on the edge of the table.

I noted with tired amusement that she was as close to me as she could be without my feeling irritated at her closeness. I wasn't sure whether that perceptiveness was a result of her aristocratic origins or something unique to Aisha herself, but it was appreciated nonetheless.

"Hakram up yet?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Apprentice said he'd be out until noon, at least. Something about drawing too deep on his Name," she paused, then raised her

voice. "Azim, if that pot isn't on its way I will have you *strung up*."

A harried-looking Soninke officer ran towards us with a very nice porcelain pot I'd see Aisha use for tea before, nearly dropping the matching cup in his haste. The Staff Tribune dismissed him impatiently after he set it on the table in front of me. I raised an eyebrow in her direction.

"Masego left me herbs for when you woke up," she explained.

I offered her a grateful nod and poured myself a cup of a brew smelling just like the one Apprentice had made me before the battle. I noticed her twitching at the sight of my pouring my own cup, which got the ghost of a smile out of me. No doubt the aristocrat in her balked at the idea of the highest-ranking person in the room filling their own cup, but she knew me well enough by now to have noticed I disliked relying on people for things I could do myself. The effect of the herbs didn't kick in immediately, unfortunately. I spoke up again to keep my mind off the burning sensation in my leg.

"Where *is* Masego, anyway?"

"Room next to yours," she said. "He didn't last much longer than you, and informed me that if anyone disturbed him for any reason they'd spend a week of their life as a toad."

I snorted. Whether or not he could actually do that was debatable – metamorphosis was a branch of sorcery that consumed a hideous amount of power for even the smallest changes – but coming from the Warlock's son the threat would be enough to give anyone pause.

"No one can find Archer," Aisha continued, "and Juniper's sleeping the battle off somewhere on a rooftop."

Surprise must have shown on my face, because the lovely Staff Tribune elaborated.

"She always does that after a fight," she explained. "Lets her mind rest."

As far as vices went, that was a rather mild one. Not that I should be surprised: the Hellhound was one of the most temperate people I'd ever met. Hardly drank, disapproved of gambling and I'd never heard of her being involved with anyone. Robber kept insinuating she was sleeping with either Aisha or Hakram, but then he'd also composed a ten-stanza poem about how Nauk had fathered half a dozen calves during our march to Callow. The tribune's words had to be taken with a grain of salt, was what I was saying. I hummed, finishing my cup and pouring another. The

taste of the brew was bitter but it soothed my throat, and already the pain in my leg was receding.

"Heiress?" I finally asked.

"Hasn't made a move," Aisha informed me. "Set up her camp around the ruins of the manor and put up a palisade. There are regular watches, but none of her men have set foot in the city."

That was fine. I was willing to be patient: night would fall eventually, and unlike Robber's men hers did not see in the dark. Wooden stakes would do little to impede goblins with knives and a mandate to spill as much blood as they could get away with.

"And so ends the Battle of Marchford," I murmured. "We got so close to a real victory, Aisha. So damned close."

The Taghreb's face went inscrutable, then she let out a soft sigh.

"Ma'am," she said, then stopped when I gave her a look. "Catherine," she corrected herself. "Look at that orc over there, the woman with the lily jutting out of her breastplate."

The sight of a broad-shouldered orc frowning down at paperwork was almost comical, I had to admit.

"That's Lieutenant Asta," Aisha continued. "When she went for water, around dawn, a five-year old boy walked up to her and have her that flower. Thanked her for saving his mother from the devils."

I met Aisha's eyes and saw she was smiling softly.

"That's happening all over Marchford, right now," she said. "Callowans are pitching in to help legionaries clear debris off the streets. Half my staff was ambushed by old women bringing them sweetbread and lamb stew. Catherine, a fortnight ago these people thought we were worse than the plague. Now children are bringing us flowers."

She rested a hand on my wrist for an instant, then withdrew. Such soft skin, for a soldier.

"That look on their faces when you walked in was *pride*, Squire," Aisha told me. "We're proud of what we did here. The Fifteenth took a stand and we were bloodied for it, but we won. And that makes all the difference."

"We didn't get the demon," I replied tiredly. "Heiress did."

The Taghreb aristocrat shrugged. "That may be true. But the stories that are coming in aren't awe about her taking care of the threat. They're about three villains and a pair of heroes,

standing between the Fifteenth and a demon. They're about you and Hakram forcing back a monster the size of a guard tower with nothing but swords and shields, about Apprentice making a new sun in the sky to scour it clean. Maybe in the Tower they'll care about what Heiress has to say, but not those of us who were here. We know, and more importantly we'll *remember*."

I looked away, feeling my throat choke up. How tired must I have been, for this to bring tears to my eyes? Aisha was kind enough to pretend she wasn't seeing anything and I forced myself to finish my last cup of herbal brew. I took a few deep breaths, enjoying the last few moments of peace I'd be getting for a long while. The Battle of Marchford might be over, but I still had another war to fight. The same war that had begun the moment I'd laid eyes on Heiress, and made the mistake of ignoring because I hadn't seen her since. A prickle at the edge of my senses chased that peace away in the blink of an eye. I immediately rose to my feet, much to Aisha's surprise.

"Lady Squire?" she asked worriedly.

"Trouble," I hissed, as a door behind me slammed open.

Masego hopped out, robes askew and his braids an unwholesome mess. His eyes were red and bloodshot.

"Fucking Hells," he snarled. "Really? Right after the demon?"

"Focus, Apprentice," I spoke up, forcing my voice to remain steady. "What exactly is this?"

"Something's coming from Arcadia," he replied, and I only now noticed he wasn't wearing his spectacles.

I had a dozen urgent questions, but none as urgent as this one: "Where?"

His fingers lit up with red light and he traced a few runes in the air, muttering under his breath as they rearranged themselves on their own.

"Where we fought it," he replied, and didn't have to specify what 'it' was.

I felt calm settle on me. We could handle this. We'd have to.

"Aisha, evacuate the whole sector," I ordered. "Send word to whichever commander is awake, I want the Fifteenth on combat footing immediately. Surround the place. Mages are to make sure nothing gets out."

She saluted immediately, and I turned to Masego.

"We're going," I said, and it wasn't a question.

—

"I thought Fae could only come into Creation through gates? You know, like the one in the Waning Woods," I said to Apprentice as we hurried through the streets.

"Powerful enough fairies can create paths," he explained, rubbing at his eyes.

The morning sun wasn't doing either of us any favours.

"And Marchford is in a unique situation," he added.

We turned a corner. The street was empty, Aisha's runners having taken care of making sure there wouldn't be anyone caught in the crossfire. It would take longer for the legion to be in position, though. We'd be without backup for the beginning of the fight.

"Elaborate," I gritted out when it became obvious he wouldn't.

"Slower," he panted.

I resisted the urge to point out that I was the cripple between the two of us. *He's running drills with Hakram after this, Heavens burn me if I lie.*

"Demons damage Creation," he told me as we cut down our pace. "The separations between Creation and a realm as close to it as Arcadia will be running thin right now. Maybe forever."

"Well that's just fucking wonderful," I cursed.

Fae inside a bloody city. Just what we needed right now. And I couldn't even use all of my legion against them: at least a third would have to be watching Heiress' army to be sure they didn't backstab us at the first occasion. Which they damn well would, because Akua was the kind of insane megalomaniac who used existential threats as catpaws. Sometimes I understood why Black had wanted to put all the Wasteland's nobility to the sword after the civil war.

"Are we sure they're going to be hostile?"

"Fae aren't hostile, Cat," he got out. "They just like their games and don't understand the concept of mortality. They're basically souls given form – inside Arcadia they can't die."

I paused. "But in Creation they can, right? *Right?*"

Apprentice cleared his throat. "That's, uh, a matter of academic debate. The most popular current of thought is—"

"*Masego,*" I barked.

"Sure," he replied, looking as pained by the lack of precision as he was by the act of running. "Stab away, that'll work."

We cut through the plaza as fast as we could and arrived at the head of the avenue just when something tore open. Blizzard poured out of an opening I couldn't see, impossibly thick. Winds howled as frost spread across the ground, an empty ruined avenue turning into the eye of the storm faster than I could unsheathe my sword. I grimaced.

"Well, that's promising," I muttered.

Masego whispered something under his breath and a moment later I stopped feeling the cold. I shot him a grateful glance, and together we strode forward. It was hard to make anything out in the spinning snow, but as we got to the edge of the blizzard we saw a silhouette approach. A man? Maybe not, the features were too fine to tell and the long hair could have belonged to either gender. If Fae even did gender, which I wasn't sure they did – some were supposed to be shapeshifters. Tall, with impossibly clear blue eyes and hair that looked more like flowing darkness than anything materially possible. Those eyes, I noted, were wide and showing white. The Fae looked at us and hesitated, then jerked.

"No," it called out in a voice that was like velvet made sound, even when taken by terror.

Something dragged it deeper into the snow storm and there was a scream, then a sickening crunch. I licked my lips nervously.

"Suddenly I'm not too sure about going to have that look," I admitted.

"You're the commander," Apprentice croaked out. "If you favour a tactical retreat, who am I to argue?"

We never got to make a choice, as the blizzard continued to expand and enveloped us a heartbeat later. I kept close to Masego and brought up my sword. The visibility was the real problem here, not even my Name sight could – the cold touch of steel against the back of my neck stilled my heart.

"Wekesa?" my teacher's voice prompted.

"She's clear," Warlock replied, still invisible. "Though someone took a butcher's knife to her soul."

"Your son?"

There was a long pause.

"Also clear," Warlock finally said.

The sword came away from my neck as the tear in the distance closed, the blizzard dispersing to reveal the sight of the Black Knight in full regalia save for the helmet. He offered me a sardonic smile.

"So," he mused. "I'm given to understand you've had an eventful few weeks."

Chapter 34: Lesson

"The Praesi take on negotiations is to slam a severed head on the table and smile at your interlocutor until they reconsider their position."

-Prokopia Lakene, first Hierarch of the League of Free Cities

Heiress was daintily picking at eggs and sausage, cutting off small slices with a knife. How she'd even arranged for a meal to be served in the guildhall was beyond me, since I'd given standing instructions for any of my officers to tell her to fuck off if she asked for anything. Either she'd bullied a Callowan to get it done – in which case I was going to break her fingers – or she'd brought servants on a military campaign. The second seemed most likely: my life would be a lot easier if she were someone stupid enough to push me when my teacher was in the city. Speaking of the man, Black would be joining us soon enough. For now he was still busy overseeing Warlock's work in clearing my legionaries. Until then, though, I refused to sit at the same table as the wretch in front of me. Just being in the same room had me itching to run her through, an urge it was getting harder to keep under control with every passing moment.

"You're quiet this morning," the Soninke aristocrat mused. "Couldn't get a good night's sleep?"

My fingers tightened until the knuckles turned white but I refused to fall for a provocation that obvious.

"One of these days," I replied softly, "I am going to find something precious to you and I am going to *break* it."

"Oh, I don't doubt you'll try," she replied with a friendly smile that never reached her eyes.

Absurdly enough, it looked like Akua had brought several suits of armour with her. The polished silver-enamelled breastplate in the Miezan style she wore wasn't one I'd seen before, and neither was the quilted colourful aketon she had underneath. It reminded me of the eye-catching robes and dresses I'd seen nobles wear when I'd first gone to the Tower. Was that how Praesi armies had looked like, before the Reforms? Like a flock of tropical birds girded in steel, as beautiful as they were poisonous? It was hard

to imagine after a lifetime of seeing the Legions of Terror decked in the sober, practical gear they now used.

I sometimes forgot that, for all the misery its lower classes often lived in, the Dread Empire was one of the richest nations on Calernia. The Hungering Sands were full of precious metals and the Wasteland was pregnant with gemstones, both of those too close to the surface to have been claimed by the dwarves. The Free Cities had famously grown rich as the middle-man between Praes and nations that wouldn't be caught dead trading directly with the Tower. And yet Wasteland aristocrats were still wealthier than anyone else on the surface, save perhaps Proceran princes – and even then those without silver in their principalities would have to rely heavily on trade to bridge the gap. I was shaken out of my thoughts by Black's arrival, which was probably for the best. Another round of verbal sparring with Akua wouldn't get me anything but the need to grind my teeth.

Black had ditched his cloak at some point, leaving him in the plain suit of plate he always wore. I could count the number of times I'd seen my teacher out of it on my fingers, but having since learned the breadth of enemies he truly had I couldn't fault him for the precaution. It wasn't paranoia if the people out to get you had a shelf full of devil-summoning books. Even being out on the field hadn't managed to get his pale skin to tan, a trait I'd come to suspect was Name related, but even then he still looked... healthy. There was a vitality to him that had been missing when I'd first stumbled into him in Laure, or perhaps just been hidden under layers of amused indolence. It made for an unsettling sight.

"Catherine," he greeted me.

"Black," I replied, rolling my eyes at the formality of it.

"Lord Black," Heiress said, making to rise, "It's a pleasure to-"

Pale green eyes flicked to Akua.

"Ram it into your hand," he Spoke.

My rival's hand slowly rose, shaking as she tried to fight it, and she nailed her other one to the table with the same knife she'd been using to break her fast. Heiress didn't cry out, though her lips thinned. Unlike my leg, mage healing would fix that wound. That said, it would have been a lie to say I didn't derive a great deal of satisfaction from what was unfolding in front of me.

"I suspect you were insufficiently disciplined as a child," Black noted. "For the rest of this conversation, you will speak only when addressed to."

"My lord, this is-" she began.

"Twist."

She ground the knife into her own hand, and this time let out a small hiss of pain.

"Do you understand me, Heiress?" Black asked patiently.

She nodded.

"Good," he smiled affably. "Now thank me, for the valuable lesson you were just taught."

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Thank you, lord," she replied through gritted teeth.

The dark-haired man claimed the seat at the head of the table and gestured for me to take the one to his right. None of this was quite as viscerally satisfying as if I'd been the one to knife her myself, but for now I'd take it. Our accounts were still far from settled.

"I'll begin with the obvious, even though I have a feeling I won't get my way," I started. "She let out a fucking demon in the middle of a military campaign. Honestly I feel like just letting one of those things loose at all should be enough to be buried in a shallow grave so I'd like her head on a pike, pretty please."

I resisted the urge to bat my eyelashes for effect. Black raised an eyebrow, then turned to Heiress.

"Rebuttal?" he prompted.

"I take no responsibility for this," she replied, face gone pale with the pain and bleeding. "The wards holding the demon were overrun by foreigners. Given Squire's pointless pursuit of the Silver Spears after her victory, it seems obvious who is at fault."

Not a single word of that was an actual lie, I was certain. Not that anyone in the room was fooled. The only question was whether or not her connections to the Truebloods would be enough to get her off with a slap on the wrist regardless of guilt. I had a nasty feeling they would be.

"No solid proof of your interference has been provided," Black told Heiress. "Because of that, Her Most Dreadful Majesty has declined to give me permission to execute you."

If she'd ever been worried it had not shown on her face, and neither did relief now. The dark-skinned aristocrat inclined her head, murmuring a platitude about Malicia's wisdom and foresight.

"That said, I would like you to keep something in mind," the green-eyed man continued.

He leaned forward.

"Your behaviour during this campaign has been a hindrance to Imperial interests in Callow, Akua Sahelian. Should it ever become a threat, I will send your mutilated corpse back to your mother piece by piece."

He did not raise his voice, or change his tone in any way. He might as well have been discussing what he'd have for dinner. He'd snatch the life out of her just as casually, I knew, and though he'd not used his terror trick I felt a shiver of fear go up my spine. The way Black was looking at her but he wasn't seeing a person: all his eyes saw were a possible liability, and he'd been leaving corpses of those behind him for decades. Akua's face remained blank but I could feel the terror beneath the mask, the realization that she'd come very close to crossing what may very well be the most dangerous man in the Empire. At the end of the day our Names were both transitional ones, the stepping stone to something greater. The monsters out there in the world were at the top of the pyramid for a very good reason: *they'd killed all their competition*. Ambition did not equate power, as my life seemed ever intent on reminding me. We still had years ahead of us before we'd be a match for any of the Calamities.

"You've been very careful to toe the line of the law," Black said. "It seems you believe this affords you a degree of protection."

His eyes turned cold.

"*I am a villain, child*," he hissed. "The appearance of the rule of law is useful to me, so I have allowed it. Do not mistake this for true fettering. Should you ever inconvenience me again, I will speak three words and you will slit your own throat."

The intensity vanished out of him as swiftly as it had appeared, replaced by a pleasant smile.

"In happier news, you and your mercenaries have been attached to the Fifteenth as auxiliaries for the next part of this campaign," he informed her. "Congratulations, you've been granted the equivalent of a commander's commission."

"Thank you, lord," Heiress murmured.

Black drummed his fingers against the table and there was a long moment of silence.

"Well?" he asked. "What are you still doing here?"

Lack of understanding flickered across the aristocrat's face, immediately blanked out.

"A mere commander is not cleared for this kind of meeting," Black explained patiently. "You are dismissed."

I swallowed a snort. Oh, now that was just *precious*. That was probably the worst insult he'd given her today, given how self-important the other villain was. Akua rose to her feet after getting the knife out of her hand, blood dripping all over the table. There was the smallest flare of magic and the bleeding stemmed. With a stiff bow, my rival made to leave.

"One last thing, Heiress," Black said, not bothering to turn to look at her. "You've made a mess all over Catherine's table. I expect you to be back with a rag and bucket to clean it up within the hour."

I'd been wrong, evidently. *That* was definitely the harshest humiliation he'd doled out in quite some time, and I took a moment to savour it as I watched Heiress close the door behind her. I leaned back in my seat, allowing myself a small break before the conversation resumed. I found Black's eyes had drifted to my bad leg, the faintest trace of a frown on his face.

"Masego said it can't be fixed," I said.

"Inaccurate," he replied. "If we amputate the leg entirely you can be grafted a fully functional replacement."

"But?" I prompted.

If it were that simple, he wouldn't be frowning.

"Limb grafts made by magic can be unmade by the same," he replied. "It would be a liability against any sorcerous Named."

"Pass, then," I grunted.

Just because the Bumbling Conjurer was dead didn't meant I'd never have to deal with a Named mage in the future. Mundane casters could probably manage the same kind of spellwork too, if in sufficient numbers. I cleared my throat.

"I do appreciate you turning the screws on Heiress a bit," I said, "but this is... unusual, for you. You don't usually intervene in these kinds of confrontations."

"None of it was meant for your benefit," he replied easily. "I was attempting to frighten her enough that she'd let out the demon."

I blinked. "That... does not strike me as a good idea."

"Wekesa began to set a binding array around this building the moment she entered," Black patiently explained. "If I'd witnessed her bringing forth a demon responsible for the death of Legion personnel, I would have had valid reason to execute her."

I frowned. "Can't Warlock just find the standard she's using?"

"He has not been able to," Black admitted.

My brows rose. "She can't possibly be that good of a mage," I said.

"It wouldn't be her own spellwork," my teacher noted. "Wolof has been the centre of sorcerous learning in Praes since the days before the Miezian occupation. No other city has ever produced as many Warlocks. Odds are she's using a dimensional bubble one of them created a century ago that has long been forgotten by everyone else."

Well, fuck. How many other surprises like this would Akua have up her sleeve? Hells, before last night I hadn't even known she was a mage. I realized the frown had yet to leave my teacher's face, which I didn't like the looks of.

"You look like you want to say something," I hazarded.

"If I believed in corporal punishment, you'd be cradling your cheek right now," he spoke flatly.

I flinched.

"You're angry."

"Furious," he agreed calmly. "You did a damned foolish thing, Catherine. Fighting a demon inside your Name, when you've yet to even fully grow into it? Recklessness is only an asset if you understand when to use it properly."

"I was in a desperate position," I defended myself.

"You put yourself in a desperate position," he corrected. "The Fifteenth did not have to engage the enemy, you *made* that choice."

"And what was the alternative?" I barked. "Run away and leave tens of thousands to die? I refuse to believe that was a better way."

"And that's why Heiress just beat you," Black replied, eyes shadowed. "As long as you allow people a lever that obvious to dictate your behaviour, they will."

"She set it up so she'd get something she wanted whatever choice I made," I replied tiredly.

On a battlefield, I was pretty sure I'd beat Heiress nine times out of ten. She didn't go for battles, though. Most of the damage she'd done me was while she was out of sight, working through proxies and spies. Black sighed.

"I'm not telling you to stop taking these kinds of stands, Catherine," he said. "But if you want to continue doing this, you need to turn the Fifteenth into the kind of force that can crush your opponents underfoot. Not next year, not when the war is over, *now*. If you cannot cut through her manipulations, you need to make them irrelevant."

"I don't have the men for that, right now," I admitted.

"I scraped together all the recruits in Callowan camps before you fought your battle at Marchford," he replied. "Within three weeks you'll have another two thousand legionaries camped across the western branch of the Hwaerte."

"Green recruits," I pointed out.

"You have a core of veterans now," Black murmured. "Men who've been through battles the equal of any waged during the Conquest. Officers who've held the line against devils and some of the finest cavalry on the continent. The legionaries who fought against the Kingdom are getting old: you might very well have the sharpest fighting force in the Empire under your command, at the moment."

That... was a very good point, actually. The Conquest had been over twenty years ago: most goblins who'd been alive back then were dead and the older human and orc soldiers from that war were either retired or permanently behind desks.

"I don't mean to dismiss your accomplishments, Catherine," my teacher said softly. "You've made mistakes, but you've also won repeated victories against horrendous odds. What you did for Marchford, the story you've created with your actions, is something that will ripple across Callow in the years to come. You've taken the first step forward in the path you set for yourself. That is something to be proud of."

For a moment I allowed myself to bask in the praise of a man I'd come to admire, for all that I despised some of the things he'd done. Only for a moment, though.

"I get why you're angry," I admitted. "I lost an aspect. That's not something that you can just walk off."

Black snorted. "A minor loss, that. The risk you took in the attempt is the infuriating part."

I blinked. "I permanently damaged my Name, Black," I spoke carefully. "Crippled the amount of power I can use by at least a third until I come into another Name."

The dark-haired man rested his chin on his palm, looking amused.

"You've seen me used my shadow before, yes?"

I nodded.

"That is the most useful fighting trick I get out of my Name. My predecessor as the Black Knight, on the other hand, could bring down a tower with a flick of his wrist. And yet on the first Fields of Streges he was killed by a footsoldier. Not a hero, not a knight or a wizard. A young woman rammed a sword in his eye, and no amount of power could allow him to shrug that off," he told me. "He died after tearing through a hundred soldiers, because he was tired and surrounded and he'd chosen his ground poorly."

He smiled darkly.

"Villains like Heiress think of power as something they can rain down on their enemies, but that's a false perception. She could set an entire field aflame and still die from an arrow in the throat. And unlike you, she *will* get in that situation. You make mistakes because of who you are, Catherine, not because of what your Name drives you to do. You can learn. You can adjust."

His fingers tapped against the wood, the rhythm that of an old Callowan funerary march.

"So pick your ground," Black spoke quietly, inexorably. "Surround her. Tire her out. And then let her do the rest."

Chapter 35: Spur

"I trust people to act according to their nature. Anything more is sentimentality."

-Dread Empress Malicia the First

The First and the Second were swarming over Aksum, stamping down the last pockets of resistance. Warlock – for Wekesa had claimed the Name now, ripped it out of the corpse of his hated predecessor – had done well in clearing the fort north of the city. It had allowed Grem to steal a march on the enemy and hit the outer walls before they were fully manned. From there it had been a slaughter, with Sabah dealing the last blow by ripping off High Lord Duma's head with her bare hands. That she was able to manage as much without letting the Beast out was a sign of how far she'd progressed in her mastery of her Name. The dark-haired

man sat alone on the hill as the sun went down, watching the plumes of smoke rising from the city.

With High Lord Mawasi dead, Seneca long buried and the High Lady of Nok having declared for them the war was as good as done. Wolof still stood strong behind High Lady Tasia, but she'd already approached Malicia to cut a deal. The last of the highborn, the High Lady of Thalassina, might have been a problem if circumstances had not intervened. Corsairs had hit the port and set what passed for the Imperial fleet on fire, looting the city before retreating to the Tideless Isles. Amadeus was going to have to take care of that, when matters were settled in the Empire. The pirates had essentially killed commerce with the Free Cities, and those trade lanes were the lifeblood of Praes.

"A great victory," a woman's voice noted.

One of these days, he was going to be able to notice Ranger when she snuck up on him. Not today, evidently.

"Was it?" he wondered.

Hye sat down at his side, her boots sliding soundlessly against the yellow grass. The dying sun cast her honey-coloured skin in gold and red, the sight of the lazy half-smile on her sharply angled face killing the breath in his throat. She was beautiful. Always was, of course, but now and then the realization of it scattered all other thoughts away.

"Your enemy is dead," she told him patiently. "His armies destroyed, his city made yours. If you find a way to be dissatisfied about this, I will be most displeased."

Considering how often she still made a game of him when they sparred, this was not a threat Amadeus would take lightly.

"Mercy, Lady Ranger," he implored drily. "Spare my already aching bones. Anyhow, if you damage me too much you'll have no more use of me."

They'd taken to sharing a bed on the very night Alaya had crowned herself Dread Empress, and all of this was still new and wondrous to him. He'd never been interested in women before, or men for that matter. Desire had been unknown to him except in an abstract sense but now it flared up in his blood every time he looked at his lover. Sometimes he was puzzled such a change had come over him. He'd not started to be attracted to Hye in that manner until he'd come to trust her as much as he could trust anyone, so perhaps the root of it was there.

"That'd be unfortunate," the dark-eyed woman admitted shamelessly. "I've finally gotten you trained up to my tastes."

Carelessly she linked their fingers and he allowed their shoulders to lean against one another as they watched the night fall.

"You're usually in a better mood, after you win," Hye finally said. "What's happening in that clever mind of yours, that has you so disappointed?"

He remained silent for a moment.

"This does not feel like a victory," Amadeus admitted. "We've accomplished nothing here."

"You made sure that scheming freeloader is getting the throne," Ranger pointed out, tone dipping into distaste when she mentioned Malicia.

It had been too much to hope for these two would actually get along, he supposed. That Alaya had not taken to the field with them had been the last nail in the coffin for Hye – she had no patience for people who did not take what they wanted with their own hands. Malicia being the reason they'd been able to fill their ranks with household troops from Nok had failed to move his lover on the matter, unfortunately.

"There was never any doubt about that," Black said frankly. "That is what irks me. All this death, all this destruction, just to confirm something I knew would happen two years ago. We've not improved the Empire's situation in any measurable manner, Hye. All we've done is clean up the mess."

Hye smiled languidly, a touch of heat coming to her dark eyes.

"Sometimes you say things like this, and I finally understand why they're all terrified of you," she said.

Black frowned.

"You've reached the threshold, Amadeus," Ranger murmured. "You have the Empire, you have your Calamities and your armies. You've broken the old, now you get to make the new."

She slid onto his lap, and-

I woke up. For one moment, I was almost pathetically relieved I could still have dreams like this, that my Name could still manage that much. I pushed aside the covers and sat up in my bed, closing my eyes to think. I'd gotten to see a lot more of Black's... personal life than I'd ever wanted to, though thankfully I'd woken before things got too graphic. Still, just associating my teacher with sex was *ugh*. That wasn't the important part of the dream though. I doubted my Name would stoop to giving me a motivational pat on the back, which meant it was the details that

were the crux of it. *You've broken the old, now you get to make the new.* Idly I thought I'd half expected Lady Ranger to have an accent, given her foreign origins, but I supposed it made sense since she didn't. She'd been around for centuries, even if in the dream she'd looked of age with Black. I chewed on the words in silence. Had I really broken something, I wondered? It didn't feel like it, not even after the twin victories the Fifteenth had gained. Then again, perhaps it was the second part of that sentence I should have been focusing on. Making something new.

That, I decided, was something I could do.

People had been on my back about choosing a personal retinue, an equivalent to my teacher's Blackguards, and believed I'd found mine during the Battle of Marchford. I'd need to take a look at the officer rolls for the Gallowborne, but unless I was mistaken the highest ranked remaining officer among them was Lieutenant Farrier. He'd do, as their captain. Not a great supporter of the Empire, but then he'd been the one to bring to my attention that a chunk of my Legion rather despised Praes. Keeping a finger on the pulse of that sentiment would be important, in the future. I'd been wanting to bring Callowans up the ranks since the beginning, anyhow, and while having that happen through known deserters was not what I'd expected I'd take it. If the bastards could take on the literal host of Hell without flinching, they could be relied on in a fight. As far as the Fifteenth's organization went, though, that was ultimately a small change. I needed to stop thinking of my army as a Legion of Terror I was borrowing and start thinking of it as the main tool in my arsenal. The reinforcements Black had promised would go some way in filling the ranks, but we'd still end up under the usual cut-off of four thousand the other legions used. Heiress' men would get us up to that, more or less, but they could not be relied on. If anything, I'd do what I could to thin out their numbers in the dark.

So what did I have, that made the Fifteenth different? Juniper was the first thing to come to mind, but the Hellhound wasn't something I could improve on. The toolbox magician, I'd heard Nauk call her once after a few drinks, and the label was accurate enough it had stuck in my mind. My legate was a fixed point, if anything. What she was could not be improved save in the unlikely event she gained a Name, so the most I could do about this was to give her more tools. Legionaries were one thing, but I needed specialists. Robber was one, because he was as much a vicious little goblin raider as he was a sapper. It might be time to take him out of Hune's kabili and give him an independent command to mould in his image. Pickler had already shown she could handle the traps, artillery and infrastructure aspects of the Fifteenth in her station as Senior Sapper, there was no need for her to have additional help in the matter.

Saboteurs and raiders, using the same tactics William had proved could turn a city on itself in Summerholm. I'd even found them their first target already.

Wasn't enough. What had I learned, from Three Hills and Marchford? What had been my best assets? The first time we'd fought the Silver Spears, the tipping point had been the goblinfire traps. My sappers were already all they could be, although my first order when I next sat with Juniper would be allowing Pickler free reign in building all the siege engines she wanted. Marchford had been won as much by magic as by steel, though. Three Hills too, now that I thought of it: it was Masego's spell that had ignited the trap. Legion doctrine was to use many mages to concentrate firepower, but Legion doctrine did not take into consideration the fact that I had a mage of Apprentice's calibre on my side. His ritual had turned a certain defeat into a battle where the Fifteenth had a fighting chance, fundamentally modifying the lay of the land. He'd needed several lines of mages to manage that, though. *So I make their assignment a permanent one.*

Black hadn't been wrong, when he'd decided how to use his mages. He'd seen that the Praesi gave birth to more mages than any other Calernian polity and turned all those untrained youths into another tool for his generals, folding goblin blood mages and the rare orc casters into those ranks to bolster the firepower. By designing a doctrine that wasn't centred around exceptional mages like Warlock he'd created an institution that would survive the death of individuals like that and remain a contributing factor on the battlefield. But to achieve this, he'd sacrificed the ability to use mass rituals that had made Praesi armies monstrously dangerous in the past. There was no need for me to follow his lead in the matter, not when I had Masego on my side. Heiress seemed to be fond of using magic to solve her problems, but I had a Named whose entire business was sorcery: she would not be able to match me in this, if I prepared correctly.

Even putting the matter of my rival aside, magic was still more of a trump card than I'd ever expected. That trick Masego had pulled with the hearths might have failed to kill the demon, but aimed at an enemy army it would kill hundreds and break morale. The rebel armies I was going to face didn't have a caster that was a match for Apprentice, didn't even use mages the way the Legions did. Did I have it in me to deploy that kind of mass murder against my enemies, knowing they had no counter for it? Maybe a year ago the thought of such one-sided killing would have had me flinching, but I'd gotten that sort of sentiment beaten out of me. I would not surrender an advantage out of a twisted sense of fair play, not when I already had so many hounds baying at the gate. Juniper drilled our soldiers into formations to deal with specific threats, there was no reason Masego could not drill

a cadre of mages in the use of rituals to ruin an enemy general's day.

I was feeling refreshed, the nap I'd taken clearing my mind of the brutal exhaustion that had been plaguing me since morning. There was one more thing I needed to fix about the Fifteenth, I knew. My legion didn't have a Kachera Tribune, the general staff officer that would oversee scouting and information gathering. Filling the position wasn't a real priority at the moment, but finding someone who could have that function was. Over and over I'd been outmanoeuvred because my opponents knew what I was doing while I was in the dark about their movements. This was no longer acceptable, not after the number of soldiers it had cost me. In the long term I might not always be able to rely on Black's network of spies, anyhow, so the sooner I found someone to build my own the better. I could afford it, what with the general's pay I was stacking up without ever really putting a dent in it. My instinct for that was to put Hakram on the case, but Adjutant might not be the best fit there.

He already had so many other responsibilities, including being at my side when I took the field. He did have contacts with officers in other legions, which would be useful, but it wasn't enough by a long shot. *I'll table that for now, then*, I thought with a grimace. Not for long, though. I was running out of time. Getting to my feet, I tested my bad leg and found with pleasure that the brew from earlier was still taking the edge off. The room had no windows so I had no idea what the time was, but odds were I'd slept through most of the day. My body had certainly needed as much. Picking up the trousers I'd lazily dropped on the floor, I slipped into them and picked up the cloth roll for my breast bindings. There might not have been much to bind, but the additional layer prevented chafing from the aketon. On the only table in the room a pair of journals were laid down, the same ones Black had given me. The one he'd said I needed to understand before he could answer my question.

My teacher had made no attempt to continue the conversation we'd started the night before we last parted ways, content to let me approach him in my own time, but it had been weeks since I'd made progress in understanding the last riddle inside the journals. That column outlining an area in square miles, roughly the size of two fifths of the Wasteland. Initially I'd thought it was the Green Stretch, but it was larger than that by a comfortable margin. Anyhow, what would be the relevance of just measuring the size of the Green Stretch? It had remained a constant area, while that column of numbers shifted from decade to decade. Its relation to the population census wasn't easy to make a pattern of, either. It did tend to rise high before Tyrants attempted to invade Callow, but it also went down sharply seemingly without reason. Weather in some parts of the Wasteland could change from

snow to drought in the span of an hour, so there might have been a link there, but I couldn't quite put a finger on it.

I'd come close to asking Kilian if she could make anything of it several times, but ultimately held back. It wasn't that I didn't trust her, but I wanted to figure this out myself. *Can I still afford to, though?* Black hadn't told me how long he'd stay in Marchford, but it couldn't be more than a few days. And when he was gone, so was my chance to finish this conversation with him. Part of me knew there was no hurry for that to happen, but there'd been too many unknowns in my life lately. This felt... important. Like Creation had put a weight on it. *Like the beginnings of a pivot.* I opened the journal one last time and ran a finger down the mystery column, but nothing came to mind. I was shaken out of my thoughts by a firm knock on the door a moment later.

"Come in," I called out, not bothering to put a shirt on.

As far as I was concerned modesty had been seen to by the bindings. To my delight, the person who came into the room was Hakram.

"Cat," he managed to get out before I strode to him and enveloped him in a hug.

He was warm, and the loose cotton shirt wasn't enough to cover the broad expanse of thick green muscle. He laid an arm around my shoulders pretty easily, given that he was over two feet taller, and clasped me close for a moment before gently pushing me away.

"Put a shirt on," he requested firmly.

"I'm just too much woman for you to handle, I see," I spoke drily.

He sighed. "Yes, your strangely-coloured thin skin and lack of proper canines has me all aflutter," he deadpanned. "Please, cover up before I can no longer control myself. Or you catch a cold."

"We don't do that anymore," I reminded him amusedly, reaching for top.

"You'll find a way," he muttered.

"You know, given how much you apparently sleep around I'm surprised you're a bit of a prude," I noted as I put my head through the shirt only to realize the sleeves were still folded in.

Good thing the troops weren't around to that, I decided.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the orc lied blatantly.

After Juniper had pointed it out, I'd started noticing how often other orcs gave my Adjutant the eye. Fighting multiple heroes and being the first of his species with a Name in centuries was apparently kind of an aphrodisiac his kind, though in all fairness it was much the same with human Named.

"You're back on your feet, then," I asked as I decided to actually put boots on for good measure.

"For now," he grunted. "Though Masego told me to avoid anything too strenuous for a few days."

"You've talked to him, then?" I murmured. "How did he look?"

"Tired, mostly," Hakram shrugged. "Happy to be reunited with his father."

I grimaced. "Saw Warlock, huh."

Had mixed feelings about that. I'd not forgotten the pleasant little chat I'd had with the Calamity back in Summerholm, or the horrifying threat he'd made with a sunny smile. I wasn't going to complain he was in the city, given how dire my need for a mage who could find corruption currently was, but the sooner he left after that the better. That Hakram had noticed nothing unusual with Masego was a mark in the mage's favour, but still... I'd seen the demon ichor touch his arm. I still remembered the moment of hesitation before his father had declared him untouched. I'd need to make sure he was still whole, one way or another. Retreating in my thoughts for a moment as I finished putting on my last boot, I only noticed Hakram casting a curious look at the still-open journal when I was done.

"A lend from my teacher," I informed him.

"I do not mean to pry," the tall orc gravelled immediately.

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. Pride had held me back, so far. That and a reluctance to act on trust even when I felt it. Still, if I couldn't rely on Hakram then who *could* I rely on?

"Maybe you should," I grunted. "Have a look, there's a column I can't quite pin down."

He lumbered over to the table, overlarge fingers picking it up. He frowned at the pages I'd left open for a long moment, then flipped back to the beginning of the journal. His frown deepened, then he flipped to the last page. Black's last entry was on the

year he'd begun the Conquest, if I remembered correctly. Why he'd stopped then was something I'd mulled over for some time.

"I think," he spoke slowly, "that number is the total territory in the Empire can bear crops."

"That doesn't make sense," I told him flatly.

He shook his head.

"Look at this," he said, returning to the first page. "The number is much larger, then it goes down after the reign of Dread Empress Sinistra the First."

"And?" I prompted.

"She's the one who tried to steal Callow's weather and ended up making the Wasteland," he reminded me.

"So it may be related to that," I conceded. "Doesn't have to be cultivable land."

He flipped back to the last page.

"The year before the Conquest," he gravelled, "the levees in the northern part of the Green Stretch broke. It flooded a massive chunk of the fields. Look at the number for that year."

It took a sharp descent. And yet...

"Hakram, that *makes no sense*," I said. "The population of Praes is slightly larger than Callow's. There's no way you can feed that many people with only that much farmland. Ater alone is half a million citizens. The whole reason death row prisoners are auctioned in Praes is so blood rituals can make parts of the Wasteland usable for crops."

I'd been horrified at the systematic gruesome executions when I'd first learned of them, but Black had flatly informed me they were a necessity. They were, as a matter of fact, one of the reasons High Lords and Ladies had come to exist: one of their duties to the lesser nobles sworn to them was to ensure enough of their fields were fertile that they could feed their own. Since the prisoners were technically under the aegis of the Tower, the gold used to buy them helped fill Imperial coffers as an unofficial tax. The practice had become less popular since the annexation of the Kingdom, since foodstuffs could simply be imported, but it had not disappeared entirely.

"That's why the area is larger than the Green Stretch," he gravelled.

I bit my lip. I didn't know much about blood magic, but for the amount of people that got bled over altars the gain seemed

incredibly low. I knew mage healing was limited by the amount of magic you could pump into something living before it was saturated, though. There was a very real possibility that using the rituals on the same grounds two consecutive years might not work. Gods Below, though, these numbers...

"I mean, even if you import from the Free Cities it would be impossible to ever accumulate a surplus," I said. "The coastal cities can fish, but every given year there would be a part of the Empire facing starvation. Hells, the moment you got a bad year of crops in the Green Stretch there'd be food shortages everywhere."

The implications of that were massive. If from generation to generation starvation remained a constant, it would leave lasting marks on the mindset of the Praesi. *And that shapes Names, in the long term.* If you added what we'd just unearthed to the book of stories Black had given me, a pattern was beginning to form that put a shiver up my spine. I passed a hand through my hair, only now noticing I'd forgotten to tie it back into a ponytail. Fixing that would have to wait.

"I need to talk to Black," I said. "Now."

Chapter 36: Madman

*"you call me villain
cast the word as you
would a stone;
seek to bury under
scorn of herded
multitude, and yet
forget my Name:*

*I am empress
most dread,
savage ruler of
yet fiercer race;
did you expect
meekness of me?*

*you call me villain
speak it a curse
as if Hells were
grasping instead
of grasped;
as if I had knelt.*

*you dare?
I am tyrant,
bringer of calamity;*

*crowned and
crowning glory
of mine empire*

*be fearful now
tremble; for
my reach is long
my wrath is great
patient but
unrivalled
above or below*

*and I will be
Triumphant"*

– Extract from the play "I, Triumphant", author unknown, banned by decree of the Tower under Terribilis II

Finding Black was easy.

According to my legionaries, he'd not left the rooms he'd claimed on the highest level of an abandoned house since we'd had the meeting with Heiress. He'd had visitors, though, including Warlock and Juniper. I was mildly surprised to find the moon up in the sky when I started the trek to his quarters, but if I'd slept that long there was no denying my body had needed it. I'd used my Name much, drawn deeper from the well than I ever had before save perhaps on the night William had given me the scar across my chest. It was kind of ridiculous that Hakram could be back on his feet after taking even worse punishment than me, but orcs were made of sterner stuff than humans. Bigger and harder bones, thicker skin and even a proportionally larger heart. There was something different about their stomachs too, related to how they ate almost only meat, but I'd never been entirely clear on what acidic humours actually did. I set aside the train of thought, recognizing it for the dissembling it was.

It was strange to find no Blackguards looming silently by the door, watching everything from behind their helmets. My teacher's personal guard followed him everywhere, but I supposed going through Arcadia might have been a bit much for regular humans. Black had been vague when I'd asked him how he'd managed the trip, though he'd at least confirmed Warlock had not been the one to open the way through the other realm. Likely they'd summoned and coerced one of the Fae, which I'd had no idea was actually possible until now. What they could have threatened it with I did not know, but if there was anyone in the Empire who could put the fear of the Gods in a creature like that it was Black. The stairs were rickety and I paused when I felt something odd about them, frowning as I used my Name sight on the wood. Runes had been traced in some kind of golden sorcery, I saw. Most of the mage

tongue was still foreign to me, but I recognized a rune associated with explosions and another with alarms.

I sighed. Of course he'd trapped the place. His manor in Ater was the second most-heavily warded place in the city, and some of the noble families had accumulated protections on theirs for centuries. Most of the work had been done by Warlock, apparently, but he'd also used ward designs coming from as far as the other side of the Tyrian Sea. The Yan Tei were famous for their arrays, whether sealing or protective: when they'd landed their punitive army on Praesi shores, back in Triumphant's day, they'd trapped at least a dozen demons in scrolls and carried them home after the war. That seemed like a horrible idea to me, now that I had personal experience with demons, but the Yan Tei did things differently from Calernians. No nation on our continent would be able to function with both a hero and a villain sharing the highest level of authority, but they seemed to be doing fine.

Since Black was disinclined to blow up the stairs under me, I finished the trip up the creaking steps. The door to his room was closed so I knocked and waited a few heartbeats before opening it. My teacher was seated at a table that had clearly come from somewhere else – it was much nicer compared to the rest of the furnishings, and too large to make up the stairway – with papers splayed all over the surface and a lit up scrying bowl to his side. Candles were scattered across the room, and the faraway silhouette of the moon shone through the window. As usual, his back was turned to the wall. He signalled for me to come in without turning, listening to the voice coming from the bowl.

"- won't settle for anything less than double," Scribe said.

"It's like negotiating with a dragon," the dark-haired man muttered peevishly. "Fine, it'll be a dent in the coffers but we can afford it. But make it clear the payoff is contingent on them following the itinerary we provided."

"Your will be done," Scribe replied, a tad drily.

Without either of them bothering with goodbyes, the scrying light winked out. There was a sad excuse for a chair placed across the table so I claimed it without a word as I snuck a look at the papers in front of him. The handwriting in most of them was familiar: Juniper's calligraphy was as exemplary as ever, a far cry from my own hasty scribbles. How she managed that with fingers twice as thick as mine remained a mystery. After-action reports for Three Hills and Marchford, if I had to guess.

"Bribing someone?" I asked curiously.

"In a manner of speaking," he said "Scribe is tying up some loose ends for me."

I hummed. "Where did you find her, anyway? The stories don't say."

The plain-faced woman was barely in them at all. That almost amused me, considering how important she was to my teacher's administration of Callow: I suspected Scribe was the reason why he'd never had to set up shop in a single city while stabilizing the country after the Conquest. The implication of that was that she single-handedly served as both the head of his spy network and a one-woman bureaucracy for a territory about the same size of the Empire. Scribe was not someone to underestimate just because she didn't go around swinging a sword, I'd known that even before Ime had warned me never to attract her ire.

"The Free Cities," he said. "It was an interesting encounter in many ways."

I bet. In the Tower, Scribe had implied she would have preferred for Black to take the throne instead of Malicia – and that Ranger had shared that preference. I'd glimpsed some of the reasons for Ranger's opinion in my latest dream, but the other woman was still very much a riddle to me. I'd never got the impression that Scribe was all that invested in the Empire itself: Black was the real reason she was here. With Warlock having outright admitted to me he didn't give a single fuck about Praes as a whole, that made two of the Calamities whose only loyalty was to my teacher. Given that Captain's very Role was bound to the concept of protecting Black, that painted a dangerous picture. There were five major Named in the Empire, aside from the Empress, and only one of them was a staunch supporter of Malicia: the rest only supported her reign by default, allegiance filtered through the Black Knight and dependent on his position.

My teacher was perfectly positioned for a coup. He'd founded the modern Legions of Terror, personally led most of their generals on the field and crafted their very philosophy. He had the Named on his side and likely most of the army. Any other villain I could think of would have already killed Malicia and taken the throne, so why hadn't he? That he was Duni must have been part of it: a paleskin on the throne would be met with immediate and bitter rebellion by most of the High Lords. I knew he was close to the Empress so that must have been a factor too, but there must have been more to it. The Black Knight was, ultimately, an icily pragmatic man: I did not believe that even a long-standing friendship would stay his hand if the recipient was in his way. I'd been promised an answer to those questions in a way, and it was time to collect. Phrasing would be important, though. He was a hard man to offend, but just asking *by the way, why haven't you murdered one of your closest friends and taken her stuff* would have him get all sardonic on me. Something to avoid: his sarcasm tended to be on the savage side.

"The Empire is not sustainable," I said instead.

Blurted out, really, but what I was saying wasn't a surprise to him. He'd left me markers on the path down to that understanding, though he'd refrained from just handing me the knowledge. He'd been right to do that: there would always have been a kernel of doubt, if I'd not put it together myself. As usual, the man surprised me with how well he understood how I thought.

"Finished the books, have you?" he said. "You are essentially correct, as long as the borders of the Empire remain what they were previous to the Conquest."

"That's just delaying the problem, though," I pointed out. "Eventually the population of Praes will get too big for Callow to feed, and honestly that's something that boggles my mind. Why does the population keep getting bigger if you can't feed it? Even if Tyrants don't do anything to address the problem, starvation by itself should keep the whole thing manageable."

Black leaned back in his seat, reaching for a jug of wine I hadn't even noticed and pouring himself a glass. With a silently raised eyebrow he asked me if I wanted a cup too and I shrugged. He took it as a yes and placed the full glass in front of me.

"Because we have the misfortune of being very, very rich," he said. "As long as the trade lanes to the Free Cities remain open, we can import large amounts of grain from Ashur and Procer."

"Procer," I repeated dubiously. "I could buy Ashur, since they're merchants to the bone, but the Principate feeding the Empire? That's a little dubious."

"Through intermediaries," he said. "Most people care little for the philosophical debates of heroes and villains, Catherine. In the end, there is a demand for grain in Praes and a surplus of grain in the Principate. The Free Cities merely provide the necessary fig leaf for that commerce to not rustle too many feathers."

"So you're telling me it *is* sustainable, then," I frowned.

"No, you were correct in your initial thought. On good years, those imports and the field sacrifices allowed us to keep our head barely above the water. Should there ever be a diplomatic incident down south, though, or even if the crops were average instead of bountiful, hunger spread across the Empire."

"And Tyrants just allowed that?" I said disbelievingly. "Hells, half of them were mad as... well, an Emperor is the usual comparison actually, and the other half were idiots but none of them were above a spot of massacre. Not a single one of them

decided to clear out a few cities to make this simpler, or even just restrict childbirth? You already do it to the Tribes."

Black sipped at his glass. I left mine untouched.

"Terribilis – the second one – was in a unique position after he reunited Praes," the dark-haired man said. "His reign was stable, his support in the nobility widespread and the Empire's military strength was at one of its historical high points. Twenty years of constant war had brought down the numbers to something easy to manage, and he decided to end the issue forever with magical sterilization and strict familial laws. He had, you see, no Callowan ambitions."

The Knight put down his glass, the sound of it oddly final.

"Within a month of his first decree, he was assassinated," Black finished.

"And that's the end of it?" I said. "Just because one failed it's not worth trying?"

"The second Maleficent came closer," he replied. "She got the Empire involved in the Free Cities, where we could bleed our surplus on foreign fields. She was too successful: Ashur and Procer allied to drive her out. Maleficent did not survive her defeat. Dread Emperor Vile tried it with a magical plague that would kill two in ten, only to trigger the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One. Sanguinara – not to be confused with the Sanguinias – made any and all law-breaking a capital offense. Overthrown within the year. Bilius the Beast attempted the Dead King's gambit of turning all Praesi into undead. Poisoned by his Chancellor, before heroes even arrived on the scene."

"What are you saying, exactly?"

"Every single Tyrant who tried to dam Praesi population growth was rebelled against, disgraced or assassinated," he spoke calmly.

And Malicia still reigned. The implications of that were horrifying.

"So Praes has been swelling with twenty years of easy food imports. Gods save us all," I whispered.

"Less than you would think," Black replied. "We had two major wars before the annexation, which killed a significant portion of people of childbearing age. Legionaries cannot have children while in service, even in logistical posts, unless a permit is granted. Malicia instituted a similar policy for the Imperial bureaucracy, which also had the effect of limiting aristocratic

influence in the ranks. And the peasantry only gets fringe benefits from our access to Callowan fields."

"But it will swell, eventually," I said. "In ten years or fifty, it makes no difference. And when it does, the Empire will need another war."

And Calernia would bleed. And Callow would bleed, as the land closest to Procer – for there was no doubt the Principate would intervene, even if they weren't the target. Procerans fancied themselves the nation that kept Evil at bay, and though they had a nasty tendency to annex their neighbours there was no denying it was them keeping the Chain of Hunger and the Kingdom of the Dead bottled up.

"It will, if it remains the same Empire it currently is," Black agreed softly.

I closed my eyes, parsing out what he'd meant by that. The problem was twofold, as I saw it. Not enough product and too much demand. Getting more product was just delaying the problem, since the demand would keep growing. Lessening the demand was the only way, but resulted in the toppling of the current regime.

"Why?" I said. "Why has every single Tyrant who tried to control population been overthrown? Many could be a bad string of coincidences, but *every single one*? That's... bigger."

Pride flickered in the man's eyes.

"Yes," he said. "The right question. *Why*? For years I wondered. Was Evil, by nature, inherently self-destructive? The House of Light argues as much. But the House of Light is a Calernian institution, shaped by Calernian struggles. Its perspective is limited. Creation, Catherine, is a thing of patterns and balance."

"The pattern for Praes is fucking up pretty bad," I pointed out.

"The pattern for Praes is to grasp," he corrected. "The pattern for Callow is to be grasped."

And just like that it clicked. For every aspect of Conquer, there was an aspect of Protect. For every hero there was a villain. Balance, enforced by a pattern. Praes got hungry, and so it invaded Callow. That was their pattern. The Empire failed, but the failure was so catastrophic its population problem was solved for a few decades. Then they got hungry again and the pattern started over.

"If Praes managed to get its population under control, it would no longer have the manpower to invade Callow," I said. "Balance

is broken. Anybody going against that loses, because they're going against the entire pattern of the Empire."

"Patterns cannot be broken," Black smiled. "But they can be... transcended. Names themselves can be transitory."

"The Empire doesn't need the manpower to invade Callow, if Callow is part of the Empire," I breathed. "Truly part of the Empire, not just a conquered territory."

Black and Malicia – for I could not believe that the Dread Empress was not up in this to her neck – had spent decades adjusting the Empire so that it would match that state. A small, permanent professional army instead of the hordes and mass rituals of old. Praesi ruling Callowan cities, Callowans in Praesi institutions like the Legions of Terror. Focus on common external enemies like the Principate while slowly and quietly smothering the racism in the bureaucracy to pave the way for integration. Gods, I'd been raised in Laure and my first instinct in looking for protection from Governor Mazus had not been heroes, it had been the local Legion garrison. And to bind the marriage, a Callowan girl in an old Praesi Name. *Me*.

My blood ran cold. This was a plan decades in the making, brilliant and utterly ruthless. My first panicked instinct was to ruin it by any way I could. Could I kill Black, here and now? Did he trust me enough that he wouldn't see the strike coming? No, that wouldn't even stop it. Malicia would carry on regardless, and there was no touching her. If I stood against the Empire now, I would do it without any of the resources I'd spent the last year accumulating – the Fifteenth would balk at rebellion when I couldn't even give them a reason they'd be happy with.

I slowed my heartbeat with a long breath, sharply aware of the pale green eyes studying me. If this worked, what would be the end result? What would happen to Callow? The Imperial Governorship system made permanent, most likely, and spread even further by the lands that would be confiscated as soon as the current rebellion was over. Too many nobles were participating, there'd be only a handful of baronies left west of the Duchy of Daoine. And the Duchy itself, I supposed, but that barely counted as Callow. Even under the Kingdom it had been an independent nation in all but name.

On the other hand, the cycle would be done. Over with. No more invasions, no more fire and brimstone coming from the East to lay waste to Callow. The thought of that was horribly, horribly tempting. But not of it came at the cost of killing everything that made Callow what it was. *They need me for this*, I realized. I was more than a possible replacement for Black, should he die or be put aside. I was, in truth, the keystone to what they were trying to build. The proof of concept it was possible at all. And that meant I had leverage. I rested against the back of the

ramshackle chair, feeling my leg twinge in pain. Forcing my hands to stop shaking, I met Black's eyes unflinchingly. Hadn't this been my plan from the beginning? Enter the ranks, and influence the institution from the inside. Praes was seeking to change Callow, but Callow could change Praes as well. Already my mind was spinning with half a dozen ways to steer this the way I wanted it to go. The way I *needed* it to go.

"I won't just let the Empire swallow Callow whole," I told Black, ignoring the voice in the back of my head that told me that sentence preceded my head rolling on the floor.

"Then don't," he shrugged. "Preserve what you believe should be preserved. Change what you believe needs to be changed. If you judge it necessary to end the governorship system, do so. If you think tributary status for duchies like with Daoine will be the most stable option, do so. As long as the right banner flies, as long as we look at the same enemies, I have no objections."

And he really didn't, I knew. He could have been lying, but there was a weight in my bones that put paid to that notion. This was a pivot, or something close to it. As long as what Black considered his victory condition was met, he genuinely did not care what the state of Callow was.

"I don't understand you," I half-cursed, half-admitted. "This isn't about being a patriot. You don't really think Praesi are better than anyone else – Hells, most of the time you act like you'd set half the people in the Wasteland on fire given a good pretext. You do these things, like the Reforms or keeping fuckers like Mazus in check, that look like they're Good – but they're not, not really. Tools, you call them, but tools are used to make something. What do you *want*, Black?"

Languidly, the green-eyed man finished the last of his wine.

"Do you know what the most common symbol for the struggle between Good and Evil is? On Calernia, that is," he specified.

A child could have answered that.

"A shatranj board," I said. "The so-called Game of the Gods."

"I've always hated that image," he spoke mildly. "It implies equality. That equivalent forces are arrayed on both sides of the board."

"Aren't there?" I frowned. "Balance, you've said it yourself."

"And yet," he murmured, "Good always wins."

As if he could feel me about to object, he raised his hand.

"We don't get real victories, Catherine. Oh, we usurp a throne for a few years. Or win a handful of battles. Once in a while, we even win a war and stay on top long enough for people to believe we are unbeatable."

His eyes turned hard.

"Then the heroes come."

I'd seen many sides to this man, since I had first met him. I'd seen him cold and vicious, on the night he'd made a game of Mazus for my edification. I'd seen his face turn into an emotionless clay mask and humanity slide off his face like droplets, on the day he'd Spoken to me. Once I'd even seen him shaken, when the Tower had received a Red Letter. But the look he had on his face now I had only glimpsed once before, when I'd quoted the Book of All Things on the subject of fate. There was an old, implacable anger to his frame. For the first time in my life, I understood why people called becoming angry 'getting mad'. There was a madness in him now, nearly visible to the eye. That should have scared me but perhaps there was some of it in me too, some orphan slip of a girl who believed she could snatch a nation from the jaws of wolves and make it her own.

"It doesn't matter how flawless the scheme was, how impregnable the fortress or powerful the magical weapon," he said. "It always ends with a band of adolescents shouting utter platitudes as they tear it all down. The game is rigged so that we lose, every single time."

He smiled at me, a dark sardonic thing.

"Half the world, turned into a prop for the glory of the other half."

The worst of it, I thought, was that I intimately understood where he was coming from. I still had the image burned into my eyelids of the Lone Swordsman effortlessly cutting his way through a full line of my men on his way to me, making a mockery of every skill I'd earned with his and battering down the strength of my Name with the superior might of his own. It had stung, when I'd realized how... easy that had all been for him. That if Warlock hadn't stepped in I'd be dead, and all my friends with me. It had felt like he'd been chosen to win before the fight had ever started. Even Hunter, who'd failed to be my equal but had simply *refused to go down*. All the things that had made heroes heroic when I was a child had become infuriating now.

"Ah, you've had a taste of it yourself," he murmured. "How much worse it must be, coming from a culture that still teaches you you can win. We don't even have that, Catherine. The hope of the happy ending. We get to cackle on the way down the cliff, or

maybe curse our killer with our last breath. You've read the stories, and stories are the lifeblood of Names."

"Villains aren't powerless," I said.

He laughed. "Oh, if the heroes deserved their victories against us, I would make my peace with it. But they don't, do they? Your sullen little nemesis gets to swing an angel's feather, while you make do with steel and wiles. That's always the way of it. At the last moment they're taught a secret spell by a dead man, or your mortal weakness is revealed to them or they somehow manage to master a power in a day that would take a villain twenty years to own. Gods, I've even heard of Choirs stepping in to settle a losing fight. The *sheer fucking arrogance of it.*"

The second time I'd ever heard him swear, and it surprised me as much as the last. Teeth bared, he leaned forward.

"None of it is earned. It is handed to them, and this offends me."

And when a villain disliked an aspect of Creation, they broke it. As simple as that. Of all the things that being a villain entailed I had grasped this one the easiest. What that said about me, I preferred not to think about.

"You asked me what I want," Black said. "This once, just this once, I want us to *win.*"

The smile across his face was a cutting, vicious thing.

"To spit in the eyes of the Hashmallim. To trample the pride of all those glorious, righteous princes. To scatter their wizards and make their oracles liars. Just to prove that it can be done."

There was something his eyes burning like coals and embers.

"So that five hundred years from now, a band of heroes shiver in the dark of night. Because they know that no matter how powerful their sword or righteous their cause, there was once a time *it wasn't enough*. That even victories ordained by the Heavens can be broken by the will of men."

A heartbeat passed and then he sagged into his seat, as if the words had drained something. The embers in his eyes cooled. I sat in my rickety chair, and thought. A long moment passed.

"Monster," I finally said.

A single word, carrying with it the faint memory of fear and a dark alley. Of a black cloak warming my frame on a cold night. It felt like an offered hand.

His lips twitched into something almost a smile. "The very worst kind," he replied.

A hand clasped. I closed my eyes, and wondered whether I'd just saved my homeland or sold it.

I did not get much sleep that night.

Interlude: Nemeses

"I've been told one can only be betrayed by a friend, which is why I constantly surround myself with enemies."

– Dread Emperor Traitorous

"This is a problem," Arzachel said.

Akua stilled her tongue before it could deliver a truly scathing piece of sarcasm. The Proceran was quite good at his work, but he did have an unfortunate tendency to present obvious truths as if they were a revelation from the Gods. The two corpses had not been touched since the picket had brought them into the supply tent, the wounds in their throats and kidneys still bloody if no longer bleeding. The smell was foul, but this was hardly the first time Heiress had ever been in a room with corpses. They'd been a staple of her childhood.

"They hit the sentinels right before dawn, as far as we can tell," the commander of her mercenaries grunted. "Knifed those two and infiltrated the camp. We don't know how far in they got."

Foundling's foul little goblins at work, of that there was no doubt. Chider had warned her that the one named Robber had a reputation among her kind as half-mad even by their standards. Akua had been sceptical that Squire would let him off the leash in the middle of a campaign but she had been incorrect, evidently. Their last confrontation had radicalized her rival more than expected. The girl took everything so personally, even when she was not meant to: Foundling had committed the Praesi cardinal sin of coming to care for her power base on a personal level. It made controlling escalation particularly tricky, though admittedly it also made manipulating her child's play.

"Are you certain they're no longer in the camp?" she asked.

They were two days off Marchford, headed for the very ford the city had been named after. This was the first night some of her men had turned up dead, though there'd been reports of goblins skulking around the edge of her camp before.

"I combed through the camp, but goblins can hide in a bare white room if they need to," Arzachel said. "We'll only know for sure when we're on the march."

In this kind of situation Akua's preferred counter would have been to go on the offensive, but the situation did not allow for that kind of manoeuvring. By officially designating her as an auxiliary the Black Knight had ensured she was bound by the regulations of the Legions of Terror. Any incident between her men and the Fifteenth would end up arbitrated by either a military tribunal whose members would be chosen by Foundling or directly by the Squire herself – who'd been granted absolute discretionary authority over the legion by Lord Black. That path ended only with gallows being raised. Even her own personal safety was at stake at the moment, though she already knew how she'd slip out of that particular noose when the time came.

No, until they reached her own objective she'd have to stay on the defensive. Not the optimal stance, but it could have its uses. Allowing Squire to build up her confidence with minor indirect victories would make it easier to blindside her later. Akua could not under any circumstances allow herself to be baited into a direct confrontation: it would be throwing away the last year of work entirely, and it was incredibly unlikely she'd manage to pull wool over the eyes of Lord Black twice in a row. The dark-skinned aristocrat consciously refrained from touching the unmarred skin on her hand where she'd rammed her own knife a few days ago. She suspected the man had been trying to bait her into something unwise, but she'd known better. He did not have enough to kill her and anything short of that could be healed in time.

The fear she still felt at the way he'd smiled at her would go away in time. No one had ever Spoken at her before, and while Lord Black was not in the same league as the Empress – there was a reason any agent who'd been in the same room as Malicia had to be disposed of immediately – he still had brought more to bear than any mere Black Knight should. A consequence of his lacking power in other areas, perhaps.

"Speak with Chider," she ordered. "She'll help you prepare for goblin raiding tactics."

Arzachel nodded, looking away too quickly. He'd been looking at her breasts, most likely. The riding dress she was currently wearing did allow some cleavage to show, and puberty had been kind to her in that regard. Akua was the result of centuries of breeding for looks and magical power, though standards of beauty had admittedly shifted several times over that length of time. That the mercenary desired her was a useful tool of control, though that attraction would have to be carefully managed: spurned men often did childish things to 'get even', and she had no intention of ever sharing a bed with the Proceran. She left without a word, mind already moving on to the next situation she had to address before the march west resumed. She had a scrying

session scheduled, and the woman she was going to be conversing with was not one she could afford to face while distracted.

Her tent had been prepared for the casting, the twenty-four layers of wards humming against her skin when she entered. Waiting for the Warlock to be gone had been common sense, for not even old Wolofite secrets were guarantee that man would not be able to listen in. He'd systematically broken through Wolofite warding schemes during the civil war, after all, and done so without even resorting to sacrifices. There were still entire cabals of mages in the city who dedicated their days to finding out how he'd accomplished that, though their efforts had not borne fruits in decades. Instead of the bowls of water some mages preferred, the Sehelians of Wolof had always used mirrors. Having them cast from the same ingot ensured a better and more stable connection than most linked items could manage, an advantage that had once ensured her family's armies could communicate as far as Foramen while their opponents could manage barely half that distance. That Lord Warlock's introduction of a long-range scrying spell accessible to all had destroyed that comparative advantage still caused some bitter feelings at home.

The round golden mirror, the size of her palm, rested innocently on the table. Akua let out a long breath and felt her mind cool. This was not a Name trick but a meditative one, setting aside distractions and allowing her thoughts to flow without emotional bias. The technique had been tortured out of a member of the Watch a few centuries ago and carefully hoarded ever since, never leaving the confines of the ruling line of Wolof. Heiress touched a finger to the polished gold.

"Show me not my reflection," she spoke in an ancient Mtethwa dialect, "but the face of your brother."

Her touch did not leave a fingerprint. There was no ripple, no uncouth glow: the eyes of her mother simply met hers a heartbeat later. High Lady Tasia Sahelian was nearly sixty years old, though she looked barely half of that. It was no glamour: rituals to maintain the physical trappings of youth and the same superior breeding that had led to both their beauty were more than enough. High cheekbones and perfect eyebrows, lovely dark golden eyes and full lips – it was no mystery why the High Lady still had so many admirers even at her age.

"Mother," Akua said.

The High Lady would not have spoken first if she hadn't, an unspoken reminder that for all that Heiress had a Name she was still not the dominant partner in their relationship.

"Akua," her mother replied. "I'm told you're finally on the march."

Likely the woman already knew where they were headed, but Heiress answered the unasked question nonetheless.

"To Liesse," she said. "We've been ordered to take the city while Lord Black deals with the rebel host."

The High Lady has no visible reaction but there was a palpable sense of satisfaction emanating from her nonetheless, even through the mirror. That part of the plan had succeeded flawlessly.

"Foundling must be anxious," Mother said. "She will be finishing her pattern of three with the hero."

Not gloating, for High Lady Tasia was better bred than that, but something close to it. Squire had actually not seemed anything of the sort, though she had to be aware that after a victory and a draw she was headed for a defeat against the Lone Swordsman. No doubt her teacher had informed her that it was possible to discharge that mandated defeat without the consequences being fatal – though Akua doubted it would easy, with a Bard on the opposing side. While those types of Names were rarely able to intervene directly, there was nothing stopping them from manipulating the situation from behind the scene.

"Is my support on schedule?" Heiress asked.

She'd sent for her own reinforcements, detachments of household troops contributed by all the ranking members of the Truebloods. Only a thousand overall, since none of the members trusted each other enough to truly deplete their strength, but it would still double her numbers. Her mother paused.

"There have been developments," she said.

Not a collapse of the Trueblood coalition, Heiress decided calmly. It was currently the most united it had been since Malicia's ascension of the Tower. An exterior factor, then. The Swordsman? He should have been in Liesse with the Stygian slaves, but heroes could be slippery that way.

"Such as?"

High Lady Tasia allowed her lips to thin in displeasure.

"The ships assembled to cross the Wasaliti were stolen," she said.

The meditation technique held, muting the sense of surprise. Not sunk, *stolen*. That phrasing was not happenstance.

"The Thief," Heiress said.

"She left a note on the shore, informing us they had been 'borrowed indefinitely'," Mother said, eyes gone hot with rage. "A small fleet, gone inside an hour without a trace. They're not on the river and our agents in Mercantis have seen no sign of them."

Heroes, unmaking a month of preparations as easily as a soldier tossed dice.

"You could charter more," Akua noted.

Mother shook her head minutely. "The Empress has finally made her move."

That single sentence brought fresh dread that put anything personal fear inflicted by Lord Black to shame. The man was a threat, but he was ultimately nothing more than an exceedingly talented warlord. Dangerous, but he could be neutered through politics. Her Most Dreadful Majesty Malicia, First of Her Name, had always been the most dangerous of the two. While her Knight settled the provinces the Empress had spent decades fencing with the sharpest minds in Praes, leaving behind her a trail of broken ambitions and exquisitely outplayed corpses.

"She was particularly clever about this one," the High Lady admitted. "Our request that the Clans be forced to pay the tributes they refused under Nefarious rests on the legality that, even when not under de facto Imperial control, territories are subject to Imperial law and obligations. Under that understanding, the lands you looted in southern Callow are granted the same legal status."

Which meant either Wolof had to pay massive reparations for the damages incurred in that territory or withdraw the request made to the Tower. That her mother was currently implying she would not have the funds to assemble another fleet of transports implied she'd already reached a decision on the matter. *And we can't rely on the other Truebloods to foot the bill. Mother is the unofficial head of the coalition, but unmatched monetary contributions would muddy that status.* Akua found she agreed with the decision made here, after a moment: wealth would flow back in Sahelian coffers soon enough, while backing down on the orc issue was not something they could ever take back. It was still incredibly inconvenient.

"I'll manage without them," Akua said, to her mother's visible approval.

In some ways having only expendable troops at her disposal opened possibilities. She'd already secured the necessary fuel for her rituals but being able to operate without the limitation of having to preserve any of her forces save her personal followers allowed for a degree of... recklessness borrowed household troops

would forbid. Not to mention never having to pay the mercenaries would relieve the family coffers of an additional burden. She could work with this, unplanned as it was.

"Keep me informed as you approach Liesse," High Lady Tasia ordered.

Akua bowed her head, though the commanding tone rankled. It always did. Without wasting any times on goodbyes, her mother's profile disappeared from the mirror. Heiress waited, for now came the contact she'd actually been looking forward to. The link between mirrors activated again, responding as if it had been triggered from the other side. It hadn't been: a spell had been used that fooled the laws of sympathy scrying relied on to make the artefact believe it was connected to its match again. An older Soninke man appeared on the surface, face wrinkled with laugh lines and sleepless nights. Not particularly handsome, but there was an intensity to him that almost made up for it when he focused entirely on something.

"Papa," Akua smiled.

"Mpanzi," her father grinned.

Dear one. He'd always refused to use the name Mother had given her. One of the few kinds of rebellion he allowed himself.

"You look tired, Papa," she frowned. "Have you been working on another project?"

"Oh, nothing important," he dismissed. "I may have stumbled onto an improvement on the Shahbaz ritual that bears promise. Still a horribly wasteful form of conversion, but it brings foundational flight closer to the sacrificial threshold."

Heiress found a smile tugging at her lips. Only her father would call modifying a ritual formula dating back to the Declaration 'nothing important'. On another day she would have asked him to elaborate if only to watch his face light up – not to mention that if he'd genuinely found a way to make flying fortresses less costly it could be very useful – but she had precious little time right now. She loved to talk magic with her father, though, she truly did. He had a real passion for the subject and as a child he'd made it a pleasure to learn. Akua believed that if he'd not been her teacher she would not be half the caster she was today, no matter the potential she'd been born to. And she still believed he would have been a much better Warlock than the current one, if he'd pressed his claim. So many things could have been different, if Papa had answered the call of the Name instead of denied it.

"You have that look on your face again, my child," the dark-skinned man sighed. "The one that says you're tugging at doors best left unopened."

"I wish you were with me," Akua said.

"I wish you had never gone at all," he replied sadly.

"You know I had to," Heiress said.

"I know your mother said that," he murmured. "You do not have to listen to her."

You do, Akua almost said, but it would have been unfair. Her father had been born one of the mostly innately talented mages of his generation, to the extent that he'd had a claim on the Name of Warlock after the previous one's assassination. He had not, however, been born to a powerful family. Minor nobility sworn to the High Lord of Aksum, a deeply paranoid man whose only daughter was already married: if he'd stayed in the village of his birth, he'd have been taken in the dark of night and never seen again. High Lords did not allow strong mages to survive if they were not personal retainers or useful breeding stock. Instead he'd found protection and funding in Wolof, where her mother had required obedience and his help in conceiving a child in exchange. He'd never even been granted official consort status.

Their only contact when she'd been a child had been her tutelage in sorcery, all other interactions strictly forbidden. Not that Papa hadn't found a way regardless, running circles around High Lady Tasia's best mages and turning it into a game for his infant daughter. She'd loved him for that and loved him still, for he had never once asked anything of her. All her life she'd been told that the gifts of her birth raised her above others, whether it be in intellect or looks or sorcery, and that girls like her only came once every few hundred years. It had been a heady thing, until she'd realized that those gifts came at a price. She was a product of the oldest blood of Praes and her loyalty to that blood was expected to be absolute. Akua was to return the banner of Evil, *real* Evil, to its rightful place at the summit of the Tower. Anything less was unacceptable.

And the truth was, she believed in this. She did not know whether or not that was because she had been raised to believe it, but ultimately it didn't matter. No matter the source the conviction had become her own. Whoring out the soul of the Empire for a few victories the way Malicia had was repulsive to her. The Empress' path was one that looked back on all of what Praes had ever been and dismissed it as the flailing of children. Every villain who'd ever spit in the eye of the Heavens swept under the carpet like a shameful blemish, a thousand years of tears and blood denied. Akua looked back on the Tyrants of old and felt only pride, for the monsters and the fools both – for even the fools had shaken

the world, in their own way. Their legacy was not wrong, it was just *incomplete*. It had taken years to realize that for all that her mother preached this gospel, the reality of intentions was different.

High Lady Tasia planned for her daughter to be the next Dread Empress and for herself to be the power behind the throne. Whether or not she ended up being Chancellor was irrelevant, so long as Akua enthroned was utterly dependent on Wolofite resources to maintain her reign. What Heiress had thought to be Fate was just another, larger cage. *You should not have taught me as well as you have, Mother, if you wanted to succeed.*

"I'll win, Papa," Akua said. "Believe in me."

"Always," he smiled softly. "I'm just getting old, Mpanzi. We old men like to fret."

"I love you," Heiress murmured, embarrassed.

"I love you too," her father replied. "Nothing will ever change that. If you can believe anything, believe in this."

Her hand remained on the mirror long after his image faded. She wished the spell had been less than perfect, so that the bleed over had warmed the metal for her touch. *I'll win*, she promised herself. She'd break the cage, even if she had to break the world with it.

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The olive-skinned old man hopped along the chalk lines traced on the ground, fumbling the last to the children's delight. The gaggle of street kids excitedly started arguing about the kind of penalty Ophon would have to submit to – he'd stood perfectly on his hands earlier, to their amazement. The shaved former slave smiled at a fair-haired girl who tugged at his pants, patting her head and promising in all seriousness that he'd show her how to use a spear later. The child scowled ferociously and told him he'd better. All of the Stygian spears were in a constant state of wonder around children, William had found. They were made magically sterile during their conditioning, for their masters believe that while sex was a useful reward their soldier-slaves should never have their loyalties split by families of their own. The Lone Swordsman snorted as the commander of the Stygian phalanx deftly pushed himself up on a single hand, muscles tensing as he maintained the stance perfectly for a solid sixty heartbeats as the kids counted out loud.

"They seem to be settling in fine," Almorava said.

Of all the heroes he'd worked with, the Bard was the only one who'd ever managed to sneak up on him. William's hand dropped

from the handle of the Penitent's Blade and he turned to look at the Ashuran musician. She'd somehow managed to sit at his side without making a single sound or getting the attention of his Name, which they were both perfectly aware should be impossible. With a salacious grin she offered him a pull from the flask of rotgut in her hand. He declined wordlessly, not that it stopped her from polishing off half the stuff inside.

"You've been gone a lot, lately," he said, turning his attention back to the city streets.

Liesse was beautiful this time of the year, just like he remembered. The City of Swans bordered a lake full of the birds it had been named for, the light stone and widespread garlands of flowers hanging from everywhere making it look like it was in a permanent festival. It was far cry from how it'd been when he'd first arrived with Baroness Dormer's host and the Stygians. Liesse had been left without a garrison by the rebels and descended almost immediately into chaos without even a city guard to keep the peace. There'd been riots and looting until he restored order, and the Duke's Plaza had been turned into a makeshift gallows where Praesi 'sympathizers' were lynched to the jeers of the crowd. Not that they even always waited for that parody of justice: more than a few couples mixing Wastelanders and Callowans had been murdered in their own homes, thought thankfully no one had been stupid enough to start a fire afterwards. Half the city would have gone up in flames if they had.

"Hasn't been much for me to do," Almorava replied, wiping her mouth and panting.

She seemed tired and a haggard, William noted. Could use a bath, not that she didn't often. In this kind of heat liquor took its toll.

"Where do you go, Bard?" he asked. "When you're not here."

"You're going to be getting a message soon," the Bard said, ignoring his question. "From the First Prince."

William's lips curled with distaste. His single meeting with the woman had not left him with much trust or fondness for her. It was said that there were three kinds of Procerans: the hot-blooded Arlesites in the south, the scheming Alamans in the centre and the coldly practical Lycaonese in the north. After meeting the Lycaonese First Prince, he'd had no trouble believing what was said about her people. She used manners and diplomacy like soldiers used sword and shield, cornering her opponents one smile and polite question at a time.

"And what does her Most Serene Highness want from me?" he asked.

"Not her," the Bard said. "Her cousin, the Augur. She's seen what's coming."

Almorava's tone had remained light but it raised William's hackles nonetheless. There'd been an ominous weight to that sentence, for all of the heroine's nonchalance.

"Squire," he said.

"And the other one," the Wandering Bard grinned. "You're a hit with the ladies, Willy. Must be your body, because I'm sad to inform you it's not your winning personality."

"You don't even sound a little bit sad," William complained good-naturedly.

Though he'd humoured his friend in her bantering, most of his attention was already on the battle ahead of him. With both the Baroness' men and his Stygian allies, he'd have both numerical superiority and walls. Against most people that would be enough, but he'd met Catherine Foundling before: uphill battles like this were her specialty. He'd already prepared the city for a siege by bringing in foodstuff from the neighbouring fields the moment the Countess Marchford had ordered him to remain and protect the unofficial rebel capital, but it wouldn't be enough. Traditional siege tactics wouldn't be the way his enemy would go at it. He'd have to watch for infiltrators, starting right now, and prepare a counter for the enemy mages. He grimaced: leading armies or even small groups was not his specialty, as Thief had pointed out a few months ago.

"I'm thinking of putting Ophon in charge of the defence," he told Almorava, gauging her for a reaction.

She hummed approvingly. "Not a bad idea," she said. "The former slave facing his former owner. It has a shape to it."

"You really think she'll let the Heiress participate?" he frowned. "I thought they were rivals."

"She won't have a choice," the Bard said, putting down her half-empty bottle and taking out a deck of cards from her bag ever-full of surprises.

Tarot, he recognized when she flicked a card at him. Six of Cups. There might have been a meaning to that, though he didn't know it.

"Are you branching out in divination, now?" he teased.

"Divination is just parsing out a story that hasn't been written yet," the Bard snorted. "As if I'd need cards to do that. No, I just like throwing those around people who think too much. They

waste their time puzzling out the meaning when they should be worried about something else."

He carefully picked up the card, holding it up. "Illuminate me, then," he said. "Why does Squire not have a choice in letting her enemy help?"

"By now the Big Guy already assigned Heiress as an auxiliary to the Fifteenth," the Bard said, "but that's just a surface detail. Patterns, Willy. It's always about patterns."

"It will be the final fight between she and I," the Lone Swordsman frowned. "You think she'll be sending in Heiress to avoid a defeat? Using a proxy, so to speak."

The Ashuran patted him on the back comfortingly, dropping the deck to pick up her flask. The cards scattered all over the floor and William repressed a twitch. He disliked messes, and she was making no move to pick any of it up.

"Close, but you're missing the point," the Bard said. "You already have all the information. When referring to Heiress earlier, what did you call her?"

"Enemy," William said.

"Before that, you sorry human-shaped sack of potatoes."

"I take offense to that, kind of," the Swordsman replied mildly. "Rival. They are rivals."

"Nemeses, even," the Bard said, smiling nastily.

A heartbeat passed until he caught on. "You mean..."

"Yours is not the only pattern of three Catherine Foundling is bound by," Almorava said. "One defeat for Heiress, on the shores of the Blessed Isle. One shared draw, in the ruins of Marchford. You know what comes next."

"A victory in Liesse," William finished. "Surely she has to be aware of that?"

"Oh, she hasn't noticed," Bard said. "As Fate would have it, the Big Guy would have. If he'd arrived in time to hear Heiress speak the word 'draw', anyway. But he was detained in Arcadia when getting there. Couldn't find someone to open a way out."

"A fortnight ago," the dark-haired hero spoke slowly, "you appeared covered in snow."

"Lovely people, the Fae," Almorava mused. "Live closer to the Story than anybody else. They know better than to ignore the warning of a mysterious cloaked stranger."

There was a long moment of silence between them as they watched the children play in the distance.

"You're a very dangerous woman, Almorava," he finally said.

"I don't have a speck of power to my Name," the Bard murmured. "All I am is a grain of sand."

That can be all it takes, to break a machine, William thought.

"You'd rather Heiress survive than Squire," he said after a moment.

"Every single time," the Ashuran agreed vehemently.

"Foundling is trying to change things for the better, at least," the Swordsman pointed out, though defending the traitor left a foul taste in his mouth.

"You need to stop thinking in terms of individuals, William," the Bard grunted. "The Squire is a legacy. So is Heiress. One of those legacies is much more dangerous to Creation than the other."

"She summoned a *demon*, Bard," the hero spoke flatly. "I'll say this for Malicia and her dogs, they've shown more restraint than their predecessors."

"It doesn't matter if she summons a whole army, though she didn't do any summoning at all. Heiress loses, in the end. That's her story. She makes a mess, but in the end she can't win. These... practical Evil types. They can win, if we let them."

"It wouldn't be the first time Evil wins," the hero said grimly. "Nor will it be the last, if we should be defeated."

"They don't win like this, William," Almorava said quietly. "This monstrosity of a plan the madman and the tyrant have cooked up? It changes things. Opens a door that can't be closed ever again. They think they're different but they're not, not really. Not enough that it matters. Patterns don't discriminate between shades, you see. They only see black and white."

"You've lost me," the green-eyed man admitted.

"Don't worry about it," the Bard sighed. "Just prepare. That plan you've been thinking of? Do it."

He didn't bother to ask her how she knew about that. The Lone Swordsman allowed the Wandering Bard to rest against his shoulder for a while. They stayed like that until the sun began to set, the silence strangely comfortable.

"Nowhere, William," she whispered, bringing the bottle up to her lips. "I go nowhere."

Chapter 37: Apprentice

"I don't trust wizards. Every time I levy taxes on them, they try to get my political opponents to pull swords from stones."

-Attributed to Louis Merovins, seventh First Prince of Procer

"She's going to betray us," I stated.

I'd kept it to only my senior officers tonight, but the circle was still larger than I liked. Juniper was lounging in her seat, face grim as Aisha stood a step behind her with her hands behind her back. Nauk and Hune occupied half the tent by themselves, the broad-shouldered orc looking like a child next to the hulking shape of my ogre commander. Pickler and Kilian shared a bench, which I noted with amusement was high enough off the ground neither of their feet touched the ground. Probably built with orcs in mind. Hakram stood behind me as a mirror of Aisha for Juniper, though a Named one. Apprentice had taken the seat next to me without a word, and barely seemed to be paying attention. The last person in the room was Ratface, who raised a sardonic eyebrow before speaking.

"Really?" he drawled. "Because Heiress always struck me as so trustworthy."

There were a few smiles at that, though no laughs. The mood was serious, as was our problem.

"Most of you already know our mandate," I said. "The Fifteenth, now bolstered with reinforcements from Callowan recruitment camps and a fresh set of auxiliaries, has been assigned to take the city of Liesse."

"The head of the snake," Nauk gravelled with a pleased note to his stone.

"The heart maybe," Aisha disagreed. "The head is Countess Marchford, and she's with the rebel host."

"Off-subject," Hune said. "There has been warning of betrayal, an immediate danger. More important than semantics."

From the corner of my eye I saw Masego visibly restrain himself from responding to that. I hurried on before the situation could devolve.

"Our auxiliary corps, which we may have to suppress before this is over, is made of a little above a thousand Proceran light infantry. All mercenaries hired through Mercantis. Juniper?"

The Hellhound stirred in her seat, dark eyes sweeping across the room.

"Proceran infantry can broadly be divided in three categories," she said. "The first is peasant levies, which usually make up most of the Principate's armies. Little to no training, basic equipment. Vulnerable to shock tactics, which are usually how Proceran win battles. The second is principality troops. Cataphracts like the ones fielded by the Silver Spears and what would qualify as heavy infantry under our classification sheets."

She leaned forward for the last part.

"The third is the type Heiress has bought. In times of war inside the Principate, fields are burned and villages sacked. Men and women who no longer have a trade take up war as a full-time occupation, though without the benefit of princely funding for their arms. Leather and mail for armour, wooden shields and longswords for armament. Almost every single one of them will be carrying javelins, and they're more lethal a volley at close range than anything we carry."

The Hellhound let out a grunt.

"If you've been wondering why I covered the other two categories of soldiers, it's to give you comparison points when planning. We are not talking about better-armed peasants: these are soldiers who fought in the Proceran civil war and took on infantry that's in the same league as our heavies. They won't be used to sappers or field artillery, but they'll have fought mages before and some of the same tactics apply: move fast and disperse, use terrain as cover when possible. They're faster than we are, and they'll avoid a collision of shield walls."

There was a pause as everyone allowed that to sink in. Nauk was frowning, Hune looked like she'd learned nothing new and Apprentice might as well have been napping for how aware he'd been of what was going on. I cast a look at Ratface and he cleared his throat.

"I've been given access to all the records kept by Heiress in my function as Quartermaster," he announced. "I imagine some of them are falsified and she's already tried to bury me in irrelevant documents, but some things can't be hidden. They won't have enough javelins for more than three volleys, I'm almost certain of that, and before our advance to Liesse is over they'll be relying on us for food and water. Their forced march to Marchford burned through most of their supplies, and they lost some before when they got whipped by the Lone Swordsman."

News of that defeat, when it had finally trickled to the Fifteenth, had evoked mixed feeling in me. Heiress getting so spectacularly beaten, even if she hadn't been there at the time,

was a win in my book. She'd had four thousand men when she'd started the night, then lost half to defection and half again to a fighting retreat. On the other hand, William had picked up two thousand former Stygian spear-slaves to add to an army that was apparently already larger than mine. The Stygian magisters were a disgusting piece of work, there was no denying that, but their horrifying training methods had also produced some of the finest Calernian infantry since the early days of the continent. The phalanx was going to stop cold whatever part of my own army faced it and then start shredding it. I had a few counters to that, thankfully, but from now on I'd have to start planning around their existence on the other side of the field.

"Our current assessment is that the forces in Liesse won't be meeting us on the field," Hakram spoke up from behind me, getting the meeting back on track. "We've prepared for the eventuality of a siege."

I looked at Pickler and the serious-faced goblin jumped in.

"The reinforcements we picked up brought a pair of Fante model trebuchets, as well as a standard load of goblin munitions. My sappers managed to make another two ballistae before we left Marchford, bringing our total to three. We can bring down the city's walls, if we take the time to do it properly."

Hune cleared her throat, the sound like caged thunder. "Are all of the ballistae irregular?"

My Senior Sapper looked displeased at the question, but she deigned to answer anyway.

"We've got two larger ones designed to clear the top of the enemy walls as well as the one we fielded against the devils – which is fit for use as field artillery."

The ogre commander grunted. "That's a yes, then. I'm not entirely comfortable with using untested designs on the field."

I raised a hand to quiet down the brewing argument before it could properly develop. Hune was a stickler for regulations and Pickler took questioning of her abilities in machinery building very personally. It was honestly surprising they'd never butted heads until now, at least never in front of me.

"We'll be running tests as soon as feasible, but it's my understanding of the situation that Senior Sapper Pickler's plans are derived from blueprints in use by the Legions," I said, and no one thought it a good idea to argue.

I disliked intervening too directly in the dynamics between the member of my high command but now wasn't the time for anyone to get hurt feelings. Internal dissensions were close to the top of

the list of things I couldn't allow to pass. I doubted anyone here was eager to defect to Heiress after she'd unleashed a demon on us, but we'd not found all the leaks yet. Hakram had identified two small fries with unexplained scrying equipment and I'd had them quietly executed before we left Marchford, but the kind of information Heiress kept getting her hands on had to be coming from someone higher up in the Fifteenth's food chain. Or at least someone who had access to someone cleared to know that kind of information.

"She's going to betray us," I reiterated. "And we need to be ready for it. When it comes to troops we have them outclassed in every way, but there's another aspect to this fight. Kilian?"

My lover offered me a discreet smile before she started speaking, prompting a swell of guilt in me. I hadn't had much time for her lately, and the grace with which she'd taken that only made it worse in my eyes.

"We've been coordinating with Lord Apprentice to set up a few surprises for the enemy," the redhead announced.

Masego seemed to wake, finally.

"The current suspicion is that Heiress has possession of a standard which holds the binding of a relatively minor demon from the Thirteenth Hell," the bespectacled man spoke, still slumped in his seat. "I've retooled a ritual that will allow us to forbid its manifestation, essentially keeping it stuck inside the standard."

"Unfortunately, the ritual requires very precise timing," Kilian explained when it became clear he wouldn't keep talking. "And at least forty mages acting in concert under the supervision of Lord Apprentice."

If there'd been a table in this tent instead of just a handful of seats and benches, I would have drummed my fingers on the surface of it.

"Heiress can't be allowed to play that card," I stated. "Not a second time, not if we're to win. I'm creating a temporary task force whose sole purpose is preparing for that ritual. The involved personnel will be assigned by Senior Mage Kilian, who'll be forwarding you a list of names later tonight."

There was no argument from the gallery, even at the loss of mages. The memory of the rampaging demon and the round of executions that had followed its appearance was still fresh for everyone.

"I'm worried we're focusing too much on Heiress, Boss," Nauk gravelled. "She's dangerous, but all she's got is a thousand

mercs and some nasty mage tricks. In Liesse there's at least seven thousand soldiers and a bunch of heroes waiting for us. They've got walls, they've got numbers and they've got access to a lake. Starving them out isn't an option, we'll have to punch through."

"We've got ideas for Liesse," the Hellhound intervened. "At the moment we're focusing on Heiress because those ideas require time and lack of intervention on her part."

"Are we allowed to know what those ideas are?" Ratface asked drily.

I didn't want to risk the plans Juniper and I had hatched getting out before they were implemented, but I could at least point my officers in the general direction.

"We've got a massive imbalance in our favour on the magical side," I told Ratface. "We intend to leverage that."

"Fortifications in all major Callowan cities have wards woven in," Apprentice contributed. "But they're not unbreakable and if the other side doesn't use mages to counter us we'll have free reign."

"As for the Lone Swordsman," I said. "He'll be mine to handle. The Thief and the Bard have limited combat value, though when we get closer to Liesse we'll have another briefing to address them."

With everyone up to date on the latest developments, it was about time to wrap this up.

"Any other questions?" I prompted.

Pickler raised her head.

"Robber has been on assignment for over a fortnight, now," she said.

I looked at Juniper, who nodded.

"You can consider his cohort of sappers detached from other duties for the foreseeable future," I said. "I've got work for them."

"Anything to do with the Procerans who turned up dead this morning?" Hune asked.

"We're keeping that operation under wraps," Juniper grunted. "High command must retain plausible deniability as much as possible."

Given the specific orders I'd given the tribune, that much was an understatement. We were breaking both Tower law and Legion regulations, and not in ways that got you a fine and a slap on the wrist. No one else had anything to bring up so my officers scattered shortly afterwards. Hakram made to linger but I shook my head – Apprentice remained in the seat opposite of mine, slouched with his eyes closed. He'd been sleeping almost ten hours a day lately, often catching naps in supply wagons when the rest of us were marching. I waited until we were alone in the tent before speaking again.

"Masego," I spoke up.

Dark eyes blinked open, staring at me through enchanted spectacles.

"Catherine," he replied, fingers rubbing at his left wrist where the demon's blood had touched his skin and now burned flesh remained. "I expect you're about to spit out whatever you've been almost saying to me for the last fortnight."

He'd noticed that, had he? At first I'd kept my distance to see if he was acting strangely. Whether or not his judgement seemed to have been affected by an outside source. The problem was, I didn't know Masego that well. I'd shared drinks with him, spoken alone quite often, but I didn't have the kind of friendship with him I had with Adjutant. Would I even notice, if he was acting strange? Warlock had cleared him of corruption, but I remembered that the man had paused before doing so. It could have been how the spell took to cast... or something else entirely. I'd nearly brought up the concern to Black, but I already knew what his answer would be: he'd trust Warlock's word. Scribe had told me, once, that Blacks great flaw as a villain was personal loyalty. Warlock was his first and oldest friend. The conclusion there wrote itself. Whatever precautions I took would have to be my own.

"I'm sorry," I said and I was, though not for the reasons he'd think.

He looked baffled. "Whatever for?"

I tapped my own left wrist and he flinched. "I took you into a fight with a demon, ill-prepared and knowing the kind of consequences it could have."

Masego sighed, the trinkets in his dreadlocks tinkling gently as he shook his head.

"Is that really what you've been chewing on all this time? I would have gone with or without you, Catherine."

I kept my surprise off my face as well as I could.

"You never struck me as the kind of man who took stands to defend strangers," I said, cautiously.

I did not mean to give offense, though I did believe what I'd just said. Masego didn't really care about people in a broader sense. A few individuals he liked, perhaps, but even then sacrifice was not in the cards for Apprentice. It just wasn't the way he thought. The dark-skinned man snorted.

"Thank the Gods I'm not," he said. "Look at all the trouble that keeps getting you into. No, this wasn't about the people. It was about the demon."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is this a Warlock thing? You think you have a duty to keep demons contained?"

That could be useful, though it would be coming out of nowhere. I'd never gotten the impression that diabolism and demonology were anything but passing interests of his. He'd known ways to handle the demon, sure, but it hadn't felt like a personal specialty.

"I don't owe anyone a damned thing," Masego said, displaying white teeth in a hard smile. "The demon itself was besides the point, it was the effect their kind has on Creation that was worth witnessing first hand."

"You went into battle against a monster like that for a *scholarly pursuit*?" I repeated disbelievingly.

His face turned from amused to serious in a heartbeat.

"It may be that to you," he conceded. "It isn't to me."

"Then help me understand," I asked, "because this makes no sense to me."

A pudgy hand pushed back and errant braid, ignoring the silver mirror shard woven into it.

"I don't remember my life from before my fathers adopted me," he admitted. "My first memories are of playing in a sprawling garden under a warm sun, tripping in a pile of daffodils."

I didn't interrupt, though the image had my lips twitching in amusement.

"I grew up there in that garden, sleeping outside more often than inside the tower where Father ran his experiments. Dada used to bury me in blankets and tell me stories until the moon came out. Never once did it become winter."

Weather control? That was an almost absurdly costly branch of sorcery, and rarely behaved as it was supposed to. Besides, I'd

have heard of it if some part of the Empire had resisted the passing of seasons for several years in a row – it was the kind of thing that drew attention. Masego smiled at the curiosity on my face.

“It was a spell, of a sort. When I turned nine years old, Father decided I was old enough for us to return to Ater. So he unmoored the chunk of land he’d stolen from Arcadia and allowed it to crumble.”

My eyes widened. “You weren’t in Creation?”

“Between it and Arcadia,” he replied. “Did you know the full name for that place is ‘Arcadia Resplendent’? There’s a reason for that. Beautiful doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

He laughed but there was no joy in it.

“Nine years old and I saw the world end,” he said. “I don’t think Father realized what he was teaching me. Creation is aptly named, Catherine: it was created by the Gods, Above and Below. To settle some kind of moral pissing match, apparently, but I’ve no interest in that.”

He raised his palm up and whispered a word in the mage tongue. A globe of light appeared over his hand, small sprites of energy spinning inside of it.

“All we are is a spell, and spells...” he closed his hand over the globe and it winked out, “can be dismissed. At any time. For any reason. All that’s required is will.”

“There’s more to it than that,” I said.

“Is there?” he smiled. “I’d like to believe so. Am I just an insect on a speck of cosmic mud, or does my immortal soul make me something greater? That is the question that has been hounding me all my life.”

“So you watch the places where Creation comes apart,” I spoke slowly. “To understand what makes it tick?”

Masego’s eyes behind his spectacles were smouldering with real passion, for the first time since I’d met him.

“There is a law in sorcery called the Sapience Limit,” he told me. “A mage cannot create something of a higher order of sentience than themselves. For millennia sorcerers and wizards alike have tried to discover whether it is a creational law or an original one, without success. An original law applies to the Gods themselves, Catherine. Consider the implications of that.”

I was starting to think I needed to pay more attention to Kilian when she talked magic after we got done with the fun parts.

"You're saying that the only difference between us and the Gods is power," I said.

He shook his head.

"Power is a consequence, a happenstance enforced by laws that were artificially set in place. Knowledge is the heart of this. And should a man know as much as a God..."

He shrugged.

"Would there even be a difference?"

I took a long moment to process that, silence heavy in the tent. Weeping Heavens, and I'd thought my teacher was ambitious.

"This is more than a little blasphemous," I finally said.

"Fuck the Gods," he said, calmly. "Every single one of them. I can respect what you and Uncle Amadeus are trying to accomplish, I really can – but you're looking at the other prisoners, when you should be looking at the bars."

I need a drink, I thought. The philosophy he'd just described could have been taken straight out of one of those old Praesi fairy tales I had a book full of. The madman with great power trying to grasp something beyond his understanding, wrecking the world in his hubris. Fuck. I'd gone into this conversation hoping my contingency wouldn't be needed, but now I couldn't pretend it wasn't even a little bit. Had he been like this, before the demon? I couldn't know. I cursed myself again for not having taken the time to get know Masego better after Summerholm.

"I'll stay with you until the end of the rebellion," Apprentice assured me, misinterpreting my silence. "I made a commitment, and seeing heroes in action again might yield some additional understandings. When the campaign is over, I'll return to Marchford to study the thinning there between Creation and Arcadia."

I cleared my throat. "That's all I can ask of you, Masego," I said. "You've already helped us much, and you'll be missed sorely when you leave."

"Flatterer," he replied, but he pushed up his spectacles to hide his embarrassed pleasure.

"I know you're not part of the Fifteenth in any official fashion," I continued, "but I've considered you one of us since Summerholm. The men agree, so I made you this."

I fished out a small brooch from inside my doublet. Bone, roughly shaped as two snakes swallowing each other's tails around a circle stamped with the Fifteenth's Miezán numbers.

"You made this?" he asked in surprise.

"Can't carve for the life of me," I admitted, "but I killed an oxen and raised it. I can kind of shape the bones when my power is in it."

"That explains the traces of your Name in it," he smiled. "Help me put it on?"

I rose easily and stood behind him, picking a braid on the back of his neck and carefully threading it inside the hair. I adjusted a last time and stepped back around, only to be greeted with a warm smile.

"Thank you," he said, touching my arm. "It means more than you think."

He excused himself afterwards and I felt dirty as I watched him part the folds of the tent. There was just a bit of my power left in the brooch, just like he'd said. Enough to activate a small mechanism Robber had created inside before treating and filling the whole bone with goblin munitions. During the war games last year, I'd gotten to observe that the alchemy reacted violently to Name power: if it was ever activated, it would blow his neck clean off.

"Contingencies," I murmured to myself.

I went to look for a fucking drink.

Chapter 38: Juncture

"Hahahahaha. Ha. You can't beat me now, this is the first part of my plan!"

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

Some days I wondered how I'd ended up where I was. In a technical sense it had all started when I'd come across Black in that alley, or perhaps the moment where I'd decided I would be joining the Legions.

"What I mean, though, is how did I end up *here*," I mused. "As in, asking a report from a blood-dripping goblin in the middle of the night while I lead some kind of shady war council."

Robber, if anything, was tickled by my sudden comment. Masego was utterly indifferent to everything going on, as was his wont, and Hakram looked like the epithet of 'shady' offended him but he couldn't find an argument to refute me.

"Bad life choices," the goblin tribune offered. "Or the best. Maybe a little bit of both."

"Don't mind me," I grunted. "It just suddenly hit home that I'm leading a Legion of Terror while wearing a black cape and plotting nefarious things in the dark."

"You're not currently wearing a cape," Masego pointed out, about as helpful as tits on a sparrow.

"Apprentice," I replied patiently, "I own like five capes. All of them black. I get we have a theme here, but would it kill anyone to get me some clothes that a vampire wouldn't wear? I mean, Heiress is Evil and she wears actual colours. And does her hair nice! I bet she even has her nails filed by some half-naked oiled up manservant."

I didn't even have manservants. My closest equivalents were an orc with a gossip addiction and a goblin who owned a jar full of eyeballs. The House of Light had always told me Evil was decadent, where were all my creature comforts? My sheets weren't even silk. The only opulence around was the way I never seemed to run out of wine and that was purely Ratface's doing.

"The ponytail looks good," Hakram said loyally.

"Hakram, I love you like a brother, but the day I take grooming advice from you is the day I jump into the Tyrian Sea," I replied.

I poured myself a glass of Vale summer wine, ignoring the look from Hakram indicating he wouldn't mind one. The crate Ratface had somehow gotten his hands on before we left Ater was mostly empty now and I wasn't wasting my favourite drink on someone who'd guzzle it down like water. I sighed and got comfortable in my wooden camp chair.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to ask at some point. Whose blood is this, Robber?"

"It could be mine," he grinned.

"Goblins bleed black," I grunted. "Try again."

"Not always true," Apprentice said. "Dread Emperor Sorcerous exsanguinated a Matron and filled in human-"

He trailed off when everyone stared at him then cleared his throat.

"Perhaps not the best time," he conceded. "Still, it's not an absolute."

I let him retreat with a modicum of dignity while he still could and pushed down the morbid curiosity that almost made me ask why Sorcerous had done that. He'd been the one to make the sentient tiger army, if I recalled correctly. The one that had defected

the moment it got out of the Tower and was the reason tigers in the Wastelands were still so intelligent. They still found half-chewed corpses by the road every year, a testament to the way the 'cleverness' of Tyrants could continue to backfire for centuries after their death.

"Robber," I prompted.

"So some of the boys and I went to have a look in Heiress' camp," he said. "Might have slit a few throats on the way in."

"I'd gathered as much," I replied. "So why does that lead you to waking me up in the middle of the night?"

"They changed up their patrol schedules after the last time we left them a few corpses," the yellow-eyed tribune grinned. "They haven't figured out Kilian's scrying them to lay out the timing."

"They will soon," Hakram grunted. "And Heiress has the mages to block us when she picks up on it."

"If she uses standard wards, I can teach your paramour to slip past them," Masego noted. I let the word pass by without a comment, since it was more or less accurate. "Though given who Akua's father is, I would not bet on it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Some other Praesi noble? I thought you could run circles around any of those."

"Nioro of Aksum. Most talented practitioner to come out of that part of the Wasteland in at least half a century," Apprentice said. "Father says he was good enough to have a claim on the Name of Warlock after the old one died, though he never pressed it."

I'd never heard the name before, which was somewhat intriguing. I'd have to ask Aisha about it at some point, since none of the men in this tent followed Praesi politics in the least.

"Anyhow," Robber said. "We planned around their schedules and routes so we could get deeper in the camp than we've ever been. Found out two interesting tidbits I thought you should know about now instead of the morning."

"Amaze me," I said.

"First, she's got a goblin in there," the tribune said.

Huh. I hadn't seen that coming, I'd give Robber that much. Heiress wasn't as consistently racist as some of the other Praesi nobility I'd come across, but she did have certain leanings. Though I'd never heard her lay on greenskins, now that I thought about it. Was she in league with one of the goblin tribes? That could get messy as all Hells.

"Recognized them?" Hakram asked.

"So just because I'm a goblin I know all the others, is that it?" Robber asked, his face the very picture of outrage.

"You've claimed as much repeatedly," Adjutant replied amusedly.

The goblin tribune shrugged, the pretense of affront discarded in a heartbeat.

"Couldn't get a good look," he said. "Was going to, but a scroll sheath fell over and woke them up. Nasty customer, whoever they are. Pretty sure they had burn wounds, and not the small discrete kind."

"I don't suppose there's a famous goblin with that as their signature?" I sighed.

"Wouldn't know," Robber said. "Didn't get out much before I joined the College. Pickler might know something I don't – she was much higher up the food chain in her own tribe."

Another question for the pile, though I doubted it would be as easy as that.

"And the other thing?" Hakram asked.

"They're making some kind of ritual array," Robber said.

Apprentice's back straightened in his seat, the reason my tribune had asked for him to be there finally clear.

"Not on the ground," Masego immediately guessed. "The runes – on wood, stone or metal?"

"Twenty five metal pegs with small square stones between them," the goblin informed us. "The stone's granite, if that makes a difference."

Robber's tribe was one of the mining ones deep in the Grey Eyries, I remembered. Apparently he still remembered some of what he'd learned there.

"It does," Apprentice muttered. "Ocean-dredged granite like the one found off Thalassina has properties linking it to the classical elements of earth and water. It's used as a stabilizer."

One of these days I was going to have to find out exactly what those 'classical elements' actually were.

"Got a look at the metal pegs," Robber continued. "Wrought iron, all of it."

"To attract, collect and retain power," Masego frowned. "Whatever the ritual is, the scale will be massive."

"Oh, I don't like the sounds of that," I cursed. "Robber did you get a look at the runes?"

"On the pegs," he replied. "There was one that was everywhere, it was..."

He paused. Yellow eyes blinked in confusion.

"I can't actually remember," he admitted.

Masego let out a small noise of understanding.

"I'm going to trace symbols in the air," he said. "Tell me when one looks familiar."

The dark-skinned mage traced a finger in the air, hard light hovering behind his touch. A dozen runes were made before Robber stopped him.

"That," he said. "I'm almost sure."

Masego traced another one, two squiggly lines with a small dot between them.

"Are you sure it wasn't this one?"

I peered at both, honestly incapable of seeing a difference between the two even if I kept staring at them.

"Could go either way," Robber grunted.

Apprentice dismissed all the shapes with a casual wave of the hand.

"Why couldn't he remember?" I asked.

"Those are High Arcana," he explained. "No one without the Gift can hold them in their mind longer than they're looking at them. Catherine, I cannot stress enough how dangerous this is. I've studied sorcery since I could walk and I'm not sure I could make an array using those. Someone on Heiress' side is a mage of the very highest caliber."

"Wolof is apparently full of stuff like this," I pointed out. "She could just have inherited the ritual."

Masego shook his head. "That's not how High Arcana works. You can't make a... recipe, using them. How the runes react to every practitioner varies wildly, even if the underlying principles are the same. The mage who made that ritual understands exactly what they're doing."

Last time I'd dismissed a warning from Apprentice I'd turned myself into a demon-touched cripple. I was not about to make the same mistake twice.

"So that just shot up to the top of my priority list," I grunted.

"You recognized some of the runes," Hakram said suddenly. "Can you guess the purpose of the ritual?"

"Retrieval," Masego murmured. "That rune means retrieval. I can think of one entity she's got contained."

Well, fuck. That had just gone from bad to worse. I'd had my mage lines and Apprentice working on something to keep the demon inside the standard, but it didn't look like Heiress was going to be using the same trick as last time. Had she anticipated I'd take countermeasures? She had a way of being one step ahead of me. *Not this time, though.*

"That ritual, can you shut it down?" I asked.

The bespectacled man smiled. "Breaking something is much easier than making it. I'm not without skills with High Arcana myself."

"Whatever you need," I said, "and I do mean whatever, you'll get it. Hakram, I'm using my authority as the Squire to put all our resources at Apprentice's disposal."

There was a heartbeat after the words left my mouth where I *wondered*. Whether this was real or just a specter Masego had dredged up to get his hands on something. I grit my teeth and put the thought aside. Kilian would keep an eye on him, as much as she could. I couldn't afford to leave a weapon like this in Heiress' hands and do nothing, not even if my answer might be compromised. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Robber, good work. You might have saved our lives tonight. Now get washed up before you stink up my camp," I ordered. "The rest of you, dismissed."

I'd need to grab whatever sleep I could before our march resumed. At least my bed was warm and full of Kilian. Apprentice lingered a moment after the others left. I raised an eyebrow at him.

"A gift," he said, fishing out something from his tunic.

It was a long pipe of carved bone with an almost comically small mouth carved like a lion's head. I blinked in surprise.

"I don't smoke bangué," I told him. "Or poppy leaves."

Bangué was more or less unknown in Callow, save for very wealthy merchants. The dreamy trance it induced was said to be highly pleasant, and without the nausea abusing drink would bring. Poppy

was better known, but so were its addictive properties. Anyhow, I'd been too strapped for gold back in Laure to ever consider trying something as expensive.

He snorted. "I didn't expect you to," he replied. "Save for wine you are remarkably free of vices. I did notice you disliked the brew I made you for the pain, though. As it happens those herbs can also be smoked."

I closed my fingers around the offered pipe. Couldn't feel any magic coming from it, but with a mage as skilled as Masego that meant nothing. Was he laying a trap as I had? I searched his face and found nothing but earnestness. Apprentice was not practiced enough a liar or intriguer to pull this kind of play, I decided. Although demon corruption might make his personality moot, if it had sunk deep enough. *If it had, though, there'd be signs.*

"Thank you," I said, and got a sunny smile in response.

I was definitely having that looked at by a mage.

—

Dawn found me sitting by a campfire, alone. I'd already eaten a bowl the stew that was the Fifteenth's morning meal and set it aside. Taking the pipe Masego had given me I took a piece of tinder from the flames and lit it up, breathing deep and letting the herbs do their work. I coughed out the first few times, but eventually got the hand of it. Kilian was on duty at the moment, but before she'd left I'd had her take a look at the gift. It was, apparently, dragonbone. That precluded enchantment of any kind: the bones and scales of dragons could not be touched by sorcery. It was why putting them down so often ended up the responsibility of heroes. Part of me wanted to chide myself for paranoia, but I could not. *I'm paranoid, but am I paranoid enough?* The lifespan of villains had not theoretical limit to it, yet they died about as old as their heroic counterparts. I noted eventually that the effect wasn't as solid as when the herbs were drunk, so I lit up a second time. The medicine was common enough I was in no danger of running out, and as long as I kept myself below a certain dosage ingested per day there was no danger of side effects. Aisha arrived just as I spewed out a stream of white smoke. She eyed me strangely then shook her head. I raised an eyebrow.

"My mother does the same," she said. "Joint pains."

I snorted. "Sit down, Aisha," I ordered.

She folded her legs and plopped down at my side, somehow managing to make the gesture fluid and graceful.

"We haven't talked much, you and I," I said.

"There has been no reason to, Lady Squire," she said cautiously.

"Drop that," I said. "I'm an orphan of no consequence, Aisha. Titles always sound mocking to me."

"With all due respect, Lady Squire," the lovely aristocrat replied, "you *were* an orphan of no consequence. Now you are, arguably, third in rank under the Empress and the Calamities. I understand you're trying to foster a certain attitude in your closest collaborators, but I would shame my family if I referred to you so casually."

"Gods, it's like dealing with Juniper all over again," I complained.

The Staff Tribune smiled. "It took me years to get her this trained up. The Red Moons are from the Northern Steppes, but her father is from the Lesser ones. That breed has a certain disregard for etiquette, even for orcs."

The Lesser Steppes were the part of the steppes north of the Empire that were on the western side of the Wasaliti's headwaters. Imperial writ had always run thin there, and so had Miezani authority before it. It was said they kept to more of the old ways there than anywhere else on Calernia. None of that had been mentioned in my history lectures at the orphanage, but orcs from there broke regulations so much more often than the others I'd gotten a primer on the subject from Hakram. I inhaled from the pipe, spitting out a mouthful of smoke as the pain in my leg finished ebbing away.

"I don't know you very well," I said. "I brought you into the Fifteenth at Juniper's request, and you've served admirably ever since."

A flicker of something passed through the Taghreb beauty's eyes.

"But I am the only aristocrat on the general staff, and there is a leak in the Fifteenth," she said.

Her tone was entirely calm, but for all that I could see she was angry from the way she held herself. A year ago I wouldn't have noticed, but a side-effect of learning to read people on the battlefield had been picking up on their reactions off of it. It must have been galling to believe your birth was being held against you, especially after a lifetime of it being held in your favour.

"That's not the issue," I said. "You've already been vetted by Black, which ends the matter as far as I'm concerned."

She paled at the mention of my teacher. My highborn officers usually did – his long-standing dislike of the nobility was well

documented and several mass graves in the Empire served as standing reminders of it.

"I know what most of my people want," I said, unashamed at the claim I was laying on my officers. "Pickler, Ratface, Nauk. Juniper, even. You though? You're like Hune in that regard. I never quite got a handle on what you're after."

Aisha remained silent for a long moment, warming her hands by the fire.

"You've done this before," she decided. "Not with Juniper, I'd have heard of it, but with Hakram. There's a reason you trust him most of us. With Hasan too, most likely, not that you'd have to dig deep to find how much he despises the nobility."

I'd always found her insistence on calling Ratface by his actual name a little strange, though since they'd been involved she likely had her reasons. I remained silent.

"You have a use for me," she mused. "And so you must know what I want."

She laughed lightly.

"Have it your way, then. I am fourth in line, Lady Squire, for a lordship sworn to Kahtan. A glorious phrasing for an inglorious reality: my family's holdings are a tower by an oasis and a village of less than two hundred people. The rest is leagues of dunes and rock. There are freeholds in the Green Stretch with more people living on them."

She turned her eyes on me, serious for all her smiling.

"My blood goes back to before the Miezani waged the War of Chains on us, Lady Catherine. The Bishara tribe was mighty once, the first to twine its ruling line with djinn. Twice we sacked Aksum and stole the wealth of its kingdom. Now? Now we die slowly in the desert, as all Taghreb do."

Aisha spat in the fire, the gesture so uncouth I blinked in surprise.

"I could have stayed home, served as steward for my oldest sister when she succeeded Father, but the thought was horrid to me. You are Callowan, Lady Catherine. I do not mean this as denigration: you simply have not been raised to see Creation as my people do. Sooner or later, the sands swallow everything. So I left before they got me too, and sought my fortune at the War College – that ancient dumping ground for noble children."

Aisha looked into the flames and smiled sadly.

"What I found there, I cannot put easily into words. Friends, yes. Something like a sister and more. But most of all, I found that my people had been left behind."

She met my eyes.

"Oh, they study our battles and praise our victories – but we are a relic of the past. I look at Praes, and see that all I've ever loved is dying the slow death. I believe in tradition, Lady Catherine. I believe that my ways still have a place in this Empire, and I will not let the Taghreb become faceless soldiers in an Imperial horde. If I must temper the wisdom of my ancestors with the steel of the world your master has made, so be it. We will survive. We will adapt. *We are not done yet.*"

Teacher, not master. The distinction became more important with every passing day. I looked at her, this lovely slip of a girl I would have thought delicate if not for the callouses on her hands, and felt a thousand years of history looking back. Ancient Kahtan had been among the greatest cities in Calernia when Callow was a mere maze of petty kingdoms, I remembered. The Taghreb had been a force to be reckoned with, once upon a time. A people who prized freedom above all, fiercely independent. I called them Praesi but there was a lie in that, a denial of history. When it came down to it her people were just as old as mine, and I could feel the same fear behind her face that sometimes kept me up at night. *Are my people done?* Was all that made Callow, Callow to be discarded in the quest for survival? Honesty for honesty, that was the trade I'd made with Hakram. I would offer Aisha Bishara no less on this misty morning.

"I will rule Callow," I said. "Some day. Because I can, because I have to. Not as the old kingdom, but as a part of the Empire – and to do it, I'll need help. Someone who can guide me when I'm dealing with the Tower and the nobles."

I offered an arm, the way Lieutenant Abase had taught me.

"Trade you," I offered, the tone light compared to the promise I was making.

She clasped my arm in the warrior's way. We both leaned away afterwards, too young for the gravity of the words we'd said. Most of the herbs in my pipe had burned during our conversation, but I pulled at the last of them and breathed out the smoke.

"So tell me," I said. "Who do I need on my side, to establish a ruling council over Callow?"

Villainous Interlude: Impresario

"The victor in a war is usually decided before the first battle's been fought."

– Prince Louis of Brabant, later eighth First Prince of Procer

Traipsing through Arcadia like some sort of murderous errand boy had been oddly nostalgic, Black mused, especially with Wekesa at his side. It had been the both of them in the beginning, before they'd ever met Sabah or Alaya. Their little jaunt through the realm of the Fae had not carried with it the same sense of momentous wonderment he'd felt back all those years ago, but there was something refreshing about being just a man with a sword instead of the Empress' implacable right hand. Things had been simpler, when he was young. The lines between friend and foe had been clear, the dangers understandable. He and Malicia had climbed the Tower only to then understand the unspoken truth of it: the higher the edifice, the narrower the summit – and the stiffer the winds. These days they spent as much time making sure they remained on top as they did actually ruling. It was like pulling weeds, he'd once told Hye, if ripping out one laid the seeds for a dozen more.

He'd put aside the thoughts by the time they arrived at the fortified camp Istrid and Sacker had established southwest of Vale. The city itself had been taken without contest before he'd left for Marchford, abandoned by the rebels. They'd only occupied it long enough to make sure no armed insurgents would be hitting their supply lines. The combined forces of the Sixth and Ninth legions theoretically numbered at eight thousand, though in truth they came closer to ten with all the camp followers and support personnel. Leaving a garrison in Vale had not been an acceptable option, not when the Countess Marchford's host numbered twenty thousand. Half of it peasant levies, admittedly, but quantity could have a quality of its own. Wekesa dismissed that ridiculous chariot pulled by winged horses his husband had gifted him years ago as Amadeus rolled his eyes. He dismounted his own horse and allowed the necromantic construct to be led away by a legionary.

"You'll be up to your neck in scheming soon, I imagine?" Warlock asked.

"I have a few irons in the fire," Amadeus agreed.

His old friend grimaced. "I'll be in my tent, then. Drinking. You always get irritatingly smug when a plan comes together."

"I do not," Black replied, but Wekesa dismissed the words with an absent wave of the hand as he walked away.

There was no way to win with this lot. He'd always made a point of not gloating even if the enemy was dead, but Hye had promptly

informed him that he made such a point of not gloating that it counted as doing it. They never let anything go, really. He'd worn leather pants once at age sixteen and it had taken them twenty years to stop mentioning it every time they went drinking. It would be another twenty before he lived down Stygia, and since Nehebka now led Tenth the whole 'negotiating with a dragon' affair would likely follow him to his grave. Sighing, Black made his way to the command tent. Eudokia was already waiting inside, the pile of parchments that followed her like an obedient dog stacked on a table as she read through his correspondence. Amadeus cast a curious look around.

"Sabah?"

"Gone hunting outriders," Scribe replied without looking at him.

"On a horse, I hope?"

The plain-faced woman shook her head and he almost frowned. The days were Captain had relied on him to cow the Beast were long gone, but if she let it out too much she still had... issues. He'd have fresh meat rations set aside for her. He'd barely poured himself a cup of wine when the generals arrived, Istrid striding in without bothering to be announced and Sacker following close behind. He'd always liked Istrid Knightsbane, in all honesty. She had weaknesses as a commander but she was not above taking advice from her staff to make up for it – and she was viciously, viciously loyal. Sacker was another story. Though the two greenskins were as sisters, after all those years working together, the goblin general had never been part of what could generously be called the 'loyalists' in the Legions of Terror. Sacker had been a Matron before becoming an officer and though the official word was that no goblin could sit on the Council of Matrons while serving in the Legions he'd always suspected she was the eyes and ears of the Council in the army. She would look out for goblin interests above everything else.

"Warlord," Istrid greeted him, clasping his arm.

"Istrid," he replied, then nodded at Sacker. "General."

"Lord," the goblin murmured.

The eye she'd lost at the hands of the Lone Swordsman's attack had been replaced by a well-crafted glass one and most of her burns had been healed through sorcery. The part of her face that had been touched by magic was not as wrinkled as the one that was untouched, making her look like she'd grafted the skin of a younger goblin on her face. The effect was somewhat gruesome and knowing her she'd been leveraging it ever since.

"Countess Talbot ain't moving," Istrid told him, accepting a cup of wine when he poured it.

Sacker shook her head when offered the same, her single living eye watching them carefully.

"She's not retreating anymore, then," Amadeus said. "Good. I was beginning to think she'd march all the way to Holden."

"She's trying to bait us into joining up with your apprentice and sieging Liesse," Sacker spoke quietly. "That way they can cut our supply line and fall on our backs."

"Catherine has Liesse in hand," he simply said.

"So now the blades come out, eh?" Istrid grinned nastily. "About time. It'll be like old times, stomping a Callowan host into the ground."

Black sipped at his cup, still standing. Sacker let out a small noise of amusement.

"There's not going to be a battle, is there?" she said.

"Not as such, no," he agreed. "Within three days the Countess' army will collapse."

Istrid looked like he'd just stolen a dozen sheep from her pens. "We *have* them, Warlord. We force a battle here and it'll be a massacre."

"That's what we're trying to avoid," Scribe said from her corner.

Both generals jumped, though Sacker much less noticeably. Neither of them had noticed Eudokia was in the pavilion – people rarely did, unless she wanted them to. A pair of hasty 'Lady Scribe's later, Black cleared his throat.

"Half of that army is peasant levies, Istrid," he said. "Farmers and craftsmen."

There was a moment of silence.

"We kill them and there's no one to till the fields when the time comes," Sacker immediately grasped.

And there was the reason the goblin was slated to be the next Marshal, even with her mixed loyalties. She had an ability to grasp the larger picture that Istrid simply lacked.

"It's not a coincidence that they started the rebellion just before sowing season," Amadeus said. "Countess Talbot is holding all of the fields in the south hostage. If we break her army too badly or burn the farmland to smoke her out, there will be food shortages in Praes. We've become too dependent on Callow for grain and fruits since the Conquest."

He'd tacitly allowed that to happen, with Malicia's blessing. Food went into the Wasteland and luxuries into Callow: the trade relationship between the two lands bound them together tighter and improved the lot of the commons on both sides. Keeping the standards of living for the lower classes high enough was the keystone of killing rebellious sentiment in its crib, both in the Wasteland and in the former kingdom. Well-fed, gainfully employed individuals tended to think twice about throwing in their lot with rebels. They had too much to lose.

"No fight at all, then?" Istrid asked, disgruntled.

"I didn't say that," Black mused. "I'll need your wolf riders ready for deployment. I am not of a mind to let rats flee the sinking ship."

Istrid grunted and from the look in her eyes Amadeus knew she'd be among those riders when they left camp. Peace was not something orcs were particularly fond of, and the Knightsbane less than most. *Crows are already gathering for what's to come, Istrid. All you have to do is wait.*

—

Morning came and word trickled out from the enemy camp that the Duke of Liesse was dead. Amadeus had ensured as much last night by slipping Scribe a piece of parchment with the words 'Gaston Caen, Duke of Liesse' on it. Since being raised by a school of hired killers had left Assassin with a particularly vicious sense of humour, the Duke had been found drowned in his own chamber pot. Relatively tame, Black decided, compared to some past killings. He blamed a twisted upbringing: the people who'd taught Assassin had used as a graduation exercise the murder of a target by use of as innocuous a tool as possible. Men had been killed with teacups, he'd been told, filing cabinets and even once half a blunted copper coin. Assassin's own graduation exercise had been the murder of every single other assassin using them against each other. The other Named had a rather thorny take on irony. Buttering his bread, the green-eyed man paused to take a sip of tea as he watched the green fields ahead of him and the rebel host beyond them.

He'd had his table set at the edge of the fortified camp, a handful of Blackguards looming behind him in a concession to safety — not that they were particularly necessary, given the very lethal wards Wekesa had set around him before stealing most of his bacon and flouncing off to bother Sabah. Ahead the Callowan army was milling aimlessly like an anthill that had been kicked, hamstrung by the death of the man they'd been rebelling to put on the throne. Duke Gaston had been little more than a figurehead while Countess Elizabeth ran the campaign as his military commander and betrothed, but figureheads were important when you assembled an army drawn from the commons. The man's

claim had derived from being the highest ranked remaining Callowan noble and from some extent that the ancient Dukes of Liesse had once been kings in their own right, which put the rebels in a spot of trouble.

The only duchy with a ruler left in Callow was the Duchy of Daoine in the north, where Duchess Kegan still watched events unfolding with her armies assembled at her capital. She was not a participant in the rebellion, though, and more than that nobody wanted a Deoraithe on the throne. They might have been a people admired by other Callowans, but they were not *liked*. Scribe dipped a wheat biscuit in her own teacup, a truly horrible habit. He frowned at her, not that she cared.

"Why only the Duke?" she asked.

Black had been about to reply when he felt a flicker at the edge of his awareness. Ah, the pest had arrived. The Wandering Bard sat on the edge of the table with a grin, though it disappeared rather quickly when he casually palmed a throwing knife and flicked it at her head. The blade would have buried to the hilt between her eyes had the Ashuran not come out of existence as smoothly as she'd appeared. Amadeus raised an eyebrow. As he'd suspected, that was not teleportation. And it did not appear to be controlled. Another flicker and the Bard reappeared in front of the table, frowning.

"You know, that's-"

Black's shadow extended behind him, casually adjusting the aim of a mounted crossbow towards the heroine and pulling the trigger. She flickered out of existence before the bolt could tear through her lungs. The next time the pest reappeared she was standing thirty feet ahead of him. A tendril of shadow snuck across the grass as she glared.

"Gotta say, you're being kind of a d-"

The tendril punctured the ground, setting off the demolition charges buried under the heroine. Black took a bite of his bread and chewed thoughtfully. The Wandering Bard did not reappear. Thrice beaten and she stayed gone, then. He'd thought that would do the trick: Names like Bards lived closer to patterns and were able to use them, but they were also more closely affected by them. None of the times where she'd been gone had been willingly triggered, he assessed. Odds were she did not control where and when she went. More than that, if the ability had not been teleportation the implications were... interesting. How could you be somewhere and then somewhere else, if not teleportation? Simply by being there, he thought, although that brought other questions with it. The appearances were not instantaneous. Where did the Bard go, when she was not in Creation? Possibly a pocket dimension. More likely, *nowhere*. Power did not come without

costs, certainly not power of that magnitude. No wonder she drank.

"What were you asking again?" he asked Scribe after a moment.

"Why you had only the Duke killed," she reminded him.

An apt question.

"Because the rebels are no more a monolith than we are," he said. "As we speak, Countess Elizabeth is likely trying to put herself forward as the candidate for the throne – and she does have the most troops under her command. She is, however, widely disliked by the other nobles. Gaston picking her as a bride was a slight to the Marchioness Vale, whose rank is higher even if she is not as wealthy or militarily capable. The Countess also despises, and is despised in turn, by the Baroness Dormer. Something about being rivals over the hand of the Shining Prince in their youth. The Baroness is currently in Liesse, but she is extremely popular with the men she's sent here."

"That leaves the Baron Holden," Scribe noted. "The Countess' cousin once removed. He'll support her."

"He would," Black agreed, "had I not told you to send that letter to Grem last month. By now he'll have received a messenger informing him that Nekhaub is torching the odd barn in his holdings and that a cohort of undead is driving his landholders into the city. Not any real damage, you understand, and deaths will be avoided, but to scared civilians it will make no difference. He'll want to return to protect his lands. It's an ingrained instinct in Callowan aristocrats."

"You're dividing them," Scribe said. "Setting them against each other."

"Under the cover of dark, if I am not mistaken, the men from Dormer and Holden will desert," Black shrugged. "Those from Dormer heading towards Liesse, the others towards home. That cuts down on their professional troops by a third."

It didn't, if you counted the mercenaries. Four thousand dwarven veterans, the heaviest of infantries. But since he'd had Eudokia deal with that matter already there was no need to belabour the explanation. As for the Baron Holden, if he followed his men in desertion – and Black was fairly certain he would – Istrid's wolf riders would be taking him. Only when he was out of sight, though. It would not do to discourage desertion. Amadeus took another sip of tea. It was a beautiful day.

Wekesa was hogging the wine, as he always did. Sabah was tearing into a barely cooked side of lamb, looking vaguely guilty as she did. She avoided that kind of behaviour around her husband, who'd never so much as glimpsed the Beast, but she did not need to be so delicate around other Calamities. They'd all seen her in the fullness of her wrath, tearing off heads effortlessly and bathing her fur in blood. Black poured himself a cup of Aksum red before Warlock could finish it, slapping away the retrieval spell the smug-looking Sovereign of the Red Skies tried to hook around the jug.

"The army looks smaller than it did yesterday," Wekesa said, trying to distract him as he pilfered some couscous from his plate.

Black refrained from rolling his eyes. Warlock only descended in petty thievery like this when he missed his husband too much, though when they'd been younger he'd also done it purely to spite the others. Until Hye had nailed his hand to a table, anyway. His lover did not brook threats to her morning tea. She'd apparently picked that up from her father, who'd been an admiral among the Teoteul until a defeat at Yan Tei hands had forced his exile. How he'd managed to cross the Tyrian Sea was a story in its own right, as was the way he'd romanced one of the few elves to ever leave the Golden Bloom. Amadeus patiently bid his shadow to form teeth and began sawing through the back leg of Wekesa's chair, but he deigned to reply.

"The soldiers from two baronies deserted during the night," he told them.

His prediction had been mostly accurate, though he'd somewhat underestimated the impact of the Duke's death. At least a thousand men from the levies had melted away under the cover of darkness, smelling a losing fight. Istrid had gone to follow the unfortunate Baron Dormer with all of her wolf riders before dawn came. They had standing orders to retreat if a hero showed up, but otherwise the outcome of that fight was settled.

"They still have most of their knights," Sabah said, clearing her throat and setting aside the clean bones of her meal.

"They do," Black conceded. "And though we've proven we can deal with them now, they'll cost us unnecessary casualties if they fight. Unlike the levies, they won't desert easily. They badly want the return of chivalric orders and only a restoration of the Kingdom can accomplish that."

"I still have that plague for horses you had me cook before the Conquest laying around somewhere," Warlock offered.

"That kind of weapon is hard to put back in the box when it's come out," Black declined. "Anyhow, the matter is handled."

"Can't be too handled, the horses are still there," Sabah pointed out.

Amadeus reached for his wine and found the cup empty. There was a very suspicious magical siphon at the bottom of it and Wekesa hadn't refilled his own cup in some time. The Black Knight glared at the other man, who grinned mockingly. He set the teeth to saw faster.

"Contrary to what many treatises preach," Black said, "I don't believe that morale shocks off the battlefield are better off delivered all at once. Several consecutive blows bring the expectation of more to come. That perception comes in more useful than one instance of great panic."

"He's still hiding more tricks up his sleeve," Sabah translated for the benefit of absolutely no one.

"I haven't been around for too long," Warlock said. "He's gotten too-"

The back leg broke and the Sovereign of the Red Skies sprawled on the grass in a messy heap. Amadeus stole his cup of wine, pointedly not smug to such an extent it looped back around to smugness.

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The third morning showed another chunk of the rebel host missing. The dwarven infantry had disappeared during the night, though not before quietly butchering most of the knights in their sleep. Their contract, though paid with Proceran silver, had technically been held by the Duke of Liesse. The fig leaf had been a necessary fiction for First Prince Cordelia, who could not be seen to be too directly involved in the rebellion if she wanted popular support. Black had simply hired the dwarves in advance for when their contract with Liesse expired and had the man killed. After that their orders were to stay for a single day, wipe out the enemy cavalry in the night and march back to the Wasaliti where barges would take them down to Mercantis. It had been a hideously expensive measure to take and he'd had to designate a route for the mercenaries to follow that wouldn't allow them to loot most of southern Callow on their way out, but the results spoke for themselves. The rebel army was falling apart at the seams, fights breaking out between supporters of the Marchioness and the Countess.

The levies were staying mostly out of that, leaving the squabbles to the retinues of nobles, but seeing their only remaining real soldiers take blades to each other was the final nail in the coffin of their willingness to wage this war. Which was why Black had quietly sent envoys to the most prominent leaders among them and asked for a parley halfway between the armies. Idly trotting

up on his horse, the Black Knight bade it to stop in front of the dozen men and women who eyed him warily without ever touching the reins. Those were an affectation, as he controlled his mount entirely through his Name – now and then enemies tried to seize them to unhorse him and got a blade through the throat for their trouble.

“Good morning,” Black greeted them politely.

Disbelieving glances were exchanged among the envoys, to his mild irritation. Why did people always expect him to be uncivil? Being Evil was no reason to be rude. Even when it was necessary to execute someone, there was no need to be unpleasant about it – and he had no intention of killing any of these people, if they did not force him to.

“Good morning,” a heavyset blond woman in her fifties replied, sounding as if she did not quite believe what she was saying.

One of the men, dark-haired and scarred by what he absent-mindedly decided to be a legionary’s blade, spat to the side.

“Ain’t come to exchange pleasantries,” the man said.

Black cocked his head to the side. The face was almost familiar, but then a lot of these soldierly types were.

“I’ve met you before,” he said. “Summerholm?”

If it had been on the Fields of Streges, the man would not be here to stand. The soldier blinked, then shook his head.

“Laure,” he replied. “Was in command at the Muddy Gate.”

“Your men held for half a bell,” Amadeus remembered idly. “Ranker thought you would be the first to fold, but she always did underestimate the Royal Guard. You were next to last.”

“Good soldiers, all of them,” the man glared. “Most of them dead now.”

“Yes,” Black spoke softly. “They fought well. They fought bravely. *And they died.*”

He had not raised his voice or used his Name to inflict fear, but a shiver went through them nonetheless. Alaya could weave lies so beautiful you wanted to believe them and Wekesa could turn a man mad with three words but Black, Black had always preferred to use truth. Nothing cut quite so deep as an unpleasant truth.

“You here to threaten us, then?” a young woman spoke belligerently.

"Do I need to?" he asked. "You know who I am. You know what I can do. Worst of all, you already know how this ends. It's the reason you're standing here in the first place."

"We still got numbers on you," another man grunted.

"I could carpet this plain with the dead," Amadeus said frankly. "Make this a victory so brutal the Fields of Streges would pale in comparison, and they were bloodier than most. But I don't want to, you see."

"Yeah, you're a real bleeding heart," the young woman from earlier said.

Black smiled. "What's your name, young lady?"

She paled, but after so much bravado she was too proud to back down in front of the others.

"Amelia," she replied, chewing her lip as she did.

It seemed the rumours he could steal someone's soul just by knowing their name had not quite died out in these parts of Callow.

"I'm a very bad man, Amelia," he said. "What I am not is a *wasteful* one. I could slaughter the heart of southern Callow's people today, but all that would accomplish is the making of corpses. Corpses don't grow crops. Corpses don't pay taxes."

"Neither do rebels," the old soldier grunted.

"So cease being rebels," Black shrugged.

"Just like that?" the woman who'd returned his greeting asked. "We just walk away?"

"Go home," Amadeus offered. "Go to your families. No sanctions will be imposed, no additional taxes levied or property confiscated. And the next time a lord comes to you with coffers full of Proceran silver talking of *freedom*, remember today. Remember that mercy once is an investment, but twice is a mistake."

And I do not make mistakes, went the unspoken sentence.

"There is a price, of course," he said and they stiffened.

Some smiled with triumph, confirmed in their private belief that Evil could never negotiate in good faith. Callow was a land of old grudges, lovingly tended to.

"The nobles," he said. "The ones who took the silver. *Give them to me.*"

He leaned back in his saddle, then smiled at them.

"You have until nightfall to think it over."

His horse wheeled away without a word as hushed whispers erupted among the envoys. Before the two bells had passed fighting erupted in the rebel camp, but it was all a foregone conclusion. Marchioness Victoria Lerness of Vale and Countess Elizabeth Talbot of Marchford were dropped off bound and gagged at the edge of his camp by men who wouldn't meet his eyes as the army started dispersing into the countryside. Some of the retinues had not fought and still lived. They would be an issue later on, he knew. He'd have to assign a legion to the area to prevent the rise of banditry. The nobles were brought to his personal pavilion, where under guard they were allowed to wash up and compose themselves. Amadeus only entered afterwards, and calmly invited them to sit.

"Marchioness Victoria," he greeted them. "Countess Elizabeth."

They were both in their forties, though even he did not look it he was older than both of them. The Countess of Marchford was fair-haired and still roughly handsome, though too sharply boned to have ever been a great beauty. The Marchioness had dark hair braided and showing thin streaks of grey, her blue eyes watery but unblinking. Neither of them showed the fear he knew they felt.

"The Carrion Lord himself," the Marchioness said. "Should I be honoured?"

"Come now, Victoria," the Countess mused. "Anything less would have been a slight."

Though mere hours before they had been at each other's throats, in the presence of the Enemy they closed ranks without hesitation. Of all the qualities of the people of Callow, he had always admired that one best. Praesi never ceased sharpening their knives even when the enemy was knocking at the gate.

"I would receive your official surrender, if you would care to give it to me," Black said.

"Oh, I don't think so," the Marchioness chuckled.

The Countess smiled. "Your offer, though kind, is declined. As the commander of the armies of the Kingdom of Callow, I must inform you that our official reply is *go fuck yourself*."

Give me a hundred officers with that kind of backbone and I'd conquer all of Creation, Black thought.

"I expected as much," Amadeus said. "Countess Marchford, the offer I made you after the Conquest still stands. A position as general at the head of a Legion as well as amnesty."

"You don't really get it, do you?" the Marchioness laughed. "I wouldn't flip Elizabeth a copper if I saw her on the street starving but I would never, not for a moment, think she'd make a truce with the Enemy. We were born free, Praesi. That's not something you forget."

"The Marchioness of Vale is correct," Elizabeth Talbot said calmly. "We both know how this ends, hound of Malicia. The noose, the chopping block, or whatever else your butchers in the East can think up."

She leaned forward, meeting his eyes.

"I would do it again, Carrion Lord," she spoke hoarsely. "Even knowing how it ends, I would do it again."

There were a few heartbeats of silence, then he sighed.

"What an utter, utter waste," Black murmured.

But the gears were turning, and didn't that say everything that needed to be said? He rose to his feet.

"Crucifixion," he said.

"Returning to Triumphant's favourite, I see," the Marchioness replied, though she paled.

"A legionary will be along soon, with a pitcher of wine," Black said. "It will be poisoned. A painless one – you'd fall asleep and never wake. Whether or not you drink is up to you. Nailing your dead body to the cross will have the same effect as if you were alive."

Villains must be graceful in victory, he believed. They knew defeat a lot more intimately than the other side. With a respectful nod, he left the two aristocrats to their last moments. The rebel army had died without the kind of battle that would make a pivot in the story unfolding across Callow. Liesse would be the closing of the rebellion, Liesse and Catherine. Looking up to the darkening sky, Black hummed an old song his mother had taught him.

It had been a beautiful day, but he'd always loved the night best.

Interlude: Rats

"Three can keep a secret, if two are dead. Unless you're a necromancer, anyway, then the world is your blasphemous undead oyster."

– Dread Emperor Sorcerous

About the only thing Ratface missed about the War College was the easy availability of good writing tables. Out on campaign he had to make do with a movable scribe's desk, which did not contain nearly as much paperwork as he actually needed it to. Juniper's insistence that everything be done by the book meant that reports like bred like vermin and he'd only barely managed to remain ahead of the curve since Ater by prioritizing what was immediately necessary. The backlog kept growing and even what passed for his staff – three unassigned literate legionaries he'd nabbed before someone could draft them into a higher priority chore – wasn't enough to cut down the mass properly. Heiress, may she be devoured by a hundred different tigers, had dropped off what must be every single scrap of parchment her people had ever written on all mixed together. The Taghreb could almost admire the elegance of following an order to the letter in a way that defeated the purpose it had been given for, but as it happened *he* was the one stuck holding the sharper with a lit fuse. Still, he'd gotten some things out of the mess.

For one Heiress had meticulously kept track of how much she fed her former slave soldiers, and had apparently obtained those supplies by paying out of her own treasury. The rations had been nothing spectacular but they'd been nutritious and systematically on time. Slaver she might have been, he thought, but at least she had taken care of her slaves well. There was something to be said for that, though it did not make the act of buying men any less despicable. In the days before the Miezans both the Soninke and the Taghreb had practiced slavery themselves, but after being on the other side of the whip for a few centuries that concept had been forcefully excised out of their cultures. Oh, some of the High Lords treated their subjects little better than slaves – but though they might lay claim to the days of their followers, they never claimed *ownership*. There was a difference there, one that had been taught to visiting Free Cities slavers through gruesome executions and at least one magical plague.

The records on the Proceran mercenaries were much vaguer, and Ratface was fairly certain this Arzachel character was skimming off the top in both loot and pay. Likely Heiress tacitly allowed as much to keep him in her debt, ready to out his indiscretions to his own men if he ever misbehaved. Said men were unfortunately loyal to their leader, he'd found out when probing their allegiances. They were well aware that they were in a foreign land surrounded by hostile forces and not even gold on the side was enough to loosen tongues – not of men with any authority to

speak of, anyway. It was standard practice among Wasteland to try to bribe your enemy's troops to betray them, so most of the nobility made a point of matching any bribe offers if those were presented to them: he'd put hand to flame Heiress had done the same. She was a traditional woman in many regards, that one.

For now he was making do by reading Robber's reports whenever they were handed in, but eventually he'd find a Proceran with more greed than sense. Heiress' real council was her assembly of Praesi lordlings and those were beyond his reach to infiltrate, but orders had to go *somewhere*. A pair of ears in the right place would allow the Fifteenth an idea of what she intended when she would turn against them. They'd gotten caught off guard at Marchford but that would not happen twice on Ratface's watch – may he swallow a hundred crows if he lied. Already he knew she'd gone to work putting out her version of the events in Praes: his contacts in Ater had reported as much. Apparently Catherine had meddled in things beyond her understanding and Heiress had been forced to step in for the sake of the Empire, putting the Tower's interests above her own by saving a rival. No doubt the nobility were hiding smiles beyond their gasps of surprise, knowing the Callowan wretch had been outwitted by superior Praesi wiles once again.

Some days, most days, Ratface was of the opinion that taking a hatchet to every lord and lady of importance in the Empire would go a long way towards making the place run more smoothly. The real danger was if Heiress managed to get her lies entrenched in the people's minds, which could make a lot of trouble down the line. Thankfully Praesi were so naturally cynical about any rumour putting the nobility in a positive light that many people were inclined to dismiss the story outright. Word of the Battle of Marchford had already trickled out in the legions posted in Callow though, according to a few friends, and there sides had been swiftly picked. If the choice was between rooting for he Carrion's Lord apprentice and the daughter of Istrid Knightsbane or the daughter of High Lady Tasia it was barely a choice at all. In the Legions, Heiress was openly blamed for the demon being summoned. Whoever had been hired to make Lady Akua the saviour in that story had botched the assignment pretty badly.

Unfortunately, Ratface did not have the resources to start rumours of his own. Not outside the Fifteenth anyway. That kind of work took gold and contacts, both of which he was short on. Whenever Catherine and the Hellhound got around to appointing a Kachera Tribune he'd hand off the entire problem to them, but until then he'd have keep the Fifteenth afloat as best he could. The legion's entire hierarchy was a mess, even more now that they'd gotten reinforced. Normally a full legion would be run by a general and their staff, under which stood two legates commanding a jesha of two thousand legionaries. The Fifteenth wasn't a full legion though, and Juniper not a general: they'd

gone on campaign with only two thousand men, which had made her a legate.

Commanders like Nauk and Hune usually numbered four and were responsible for a kabili of a thousand legionaries each, but even now that the Fifteenth numbered almost three thousand they remained the only officers of their rank. Both kabili were over strength, though detaching Robber's cohort of two hundred as an independent force had cut down on that to an extent. Aisha's purpose as an officer was to keep all this organized, a hellish nightmare on the best of days. Ratface's tendency towards sympathizing was mitigated some by the fact that she kept denying his own requests for additional staff: known leaks in the legion had made the Staff Tribune very tight-fisted with the kind of security clearance needed to work under him. Ratface sighed and fished out one of the parchment rolls from the overdue pile, this one inherited from Nauk. The orc had never been great with numbers and leaned heavily on Nilin to handle his supply requests, which had made the man's death at Three Hills a minor organisational disaster.

Nauk's new Senior Tribune had stepped up since but Ratface had still inherited quite a few papers when Nilin's affairs had been distributed. This one had been handed separately and later than the others, hence his curiosity.

Unrolling the parchment, the Quartermaster scanned the neatly written lines while only paying half-attention. Old supply numbers from Marchford, he saw. Nothing particularly relevant anymore. Setting aside the scroll, Ratface picked up another and then paused. He picked up the previous parchment again, paying closer attention to the numbers. He'd already gotten a report for Nauk's kabili for that month, he remembered. It did not match the numbers he was currently looking at. Some of them were outright absurd – seventy-three missing scutum? *An early draft? No. Nilin was cleverer than that.* He'd never been close to the Soninke tribune, not even when they'd both been in Rat Company, but they'd known each other socially. Nilin had been one of the most educated people in their company, one of the few who read in his leisure time. And yet the report in front of him could have only been written by a credulous idiot.

"Oh, Merciless Gods," the olive-skinned bastard murmured. "Let me be wrong about this."

"Sir?" one of his staff asked, raising her head from her own pile.

"Abba," he said, closing his eyes. "Get me one of Kilian's mages, one who can scry. And then all of you clear the tent."

He got Kilian herself. Good. Better to keep this in the family as long as he could. The redheaded mage frowned when he told her exactly what he wanted.

"That's a specialized formula," she said. "You're targeting a specific scrying increment without it reaching back. That's fairly sophisticated stuff, Ratface, and you're not a mage. How do you even know about this?"

"I paid for it," he replied drily.

There were plenty of mages in Ater who were too weak to be worth forcefully adding to the forces of either the Empress or the High Lords, and they needed to eat just like everybody else. Some of them fell with bad crowds to keep their heads above the water, and Ratface had been swimming in those ugly waters since the day he'd stepped foot in Ater. Nowadays, he was just as home there as all the other predators.

"Scrying's restricted at the moment," Kilian reminded him, her frown disinclined to leave.

"I have a pass," he said patiently.

"I know, I know," the Duni said. "This just seems, uh, pretty shady."

Ratface hummed, but did not disagree. She'd soon be upgrading that assessment from 'pretty' to 'very'. The fae-blooded woman spoke the formula he'd provided, carefully enunciating every syllable in the mage tongue. Using magic made her look more alive, he noticed, put a flush to her cheeks and a shine to her eyes. He could understand why Catherine was so taken with their Senior Mage, though he was not interested himself. As a man with a few issues of his own, he could smell the same on Kilian buried under the smiling and the gentleness. The spell connected, linking the scrying bowl on the table to a cube of quartz set on a bed table. The Quartermaster cleared his throat loudly, bringing awake the shape of a man in a bed. Kilian blinked when she recognized the distorted face of Instructor Raman.

"Instructor," Ratface greeted the man. "Good evening."

"It's the middle of the night, boy," their former Basic Tactics instructor from the War College snarled. "What the Hells are you doing waking me up? I have classes tomorrow."

The dark-eyed bastard raised an eyebrow.

"Your tone," he said. "Watch it."

The man bit his tongue, though even through a distorted image Ratface could see he was furious.

"I need you to look into records for me, from five years ago," he said.

"You know I'm not allowed to look at those," the instructor said.

"I know you have a key to the room," Ratface replied. "The same one you use to get back into the facilities after nights of whoring and gambling."

"Don't say that," Raman whispered furiously. "Someone might be listening in."

"You're going to look into the admittance record of a former student called Nilin of Dula," the Quartermaster said calmly.

Kilian jumped in surprise, though her control over the spell did not waver.

"I remember him," the instructor said. "Boy on the imperial ticket, from your company."

"I want to know who sponsored him," Ratface said.

The other man remained silent for a few heartbeats.

"That's Tower business, boy," he said. "I'm not getting mixed up in it."

"It appears you've come to a misapprehension as to the nature of this relationship," the Taghreb said. "When I tell you to do something, you do it. Or I sell your debt to the Night Harpies, who'll collect after breaking your knees and taking a few fingers."

"At least I'll still be alive," Raman spat.

A different track, perhaps.

"When dawn comes," Ratface said, "I'll be making a report to Catherine Foundling."

The instructor laughed. "I'm employed at the War College, boy. We're under the protection of the Carrion Lord."

"She can take that away with a single sentence, if she scries him," he replied flatly. "I think you need to consider very carefully whether, when I make my report, you want your name to come up as an asset or an obstacle."

Catherine had refrained from throwing around her weight in Wasteland politics, so far, but she'd gotten pushed by the Truebloods one time too many. More than once he'd seen her talking alone with Aisha, which he took to mean she was finally starting some trouble of her own. Lord Black would back her in

this particular matter, he was sure of it. The man was openly protective of his student: when the Fifteenth had been in the process of being raised, word had been put out on the streets of Ater that plucking even a single strand of hair from her head would be met with brutal retaliation. When the mailed fist of the Empress gave a warning, people *listened*. There were plenty of stories going around about the people who'd been stupid enough not to, and none of them ended nicely.

"Have it your way, then," the instructor said.

"Now and then, that does happen," Ratface spoke sardonically.

—

Nilin had been sponsored into the War College by a minor official called Kadun Lombo. Not, Ratface noted, the headmistress of the local Imperial school. That could be significant. Most students on the ticket were picked by the person running their school, though in all fairness meddling bureaucrats were commonplace in Praes. A favour to a promising student not chosen could end up being paid tenfold a few years down the line, should the student rise in authority.

"You think Nilin was a spy," Kilian said.

"I suspect he was a spy," Ratface corrected.

The redhead clenched her fingers into a fist. She was not angry at him, he thought, but at the thought that any member of Rat Company could have possibly passed information to the likes of Heiress. Ever since the founding of the their legion, the former cadets of the company had taken to watching each other's backs around the others. Avoiding that kind of clannishness was one of the main reasons cadets were split among different legions when they graduated, but the Fifteenth was not an average legion in many regards.

"We all got offers," the Senior Mage finally said. "After the melee."

They did not talk of it among themselves often, but all officers who'd been brought over from the Rats had been quietly approached before they set out for Callow. Oh, and what pretty offers they'd been. They'd told Ratface he could be reinstated as heir to his father's lordship, if he turned his cloak. He wouldn't even have to do much, just send a few messages now and then. He still clenched his teeth just thinking about it. Just a pawn, they'd thought of him. A tool that could be bought so the nobles could keep playing their games with the lives of their inferiors. The Truebloods were a rot in the body of Praes, a sickness in dire need of amputation. And on the day Catherine Foundling wielded

the knife that would do away with them, he would be there.
Smiling.

"What did they offer you?" he asked.

"Positions for my parents in Wolof," Kilian said. "Gold too, of course, even some magical tomes. Everybody knows the Duni are a breed of servants, out only to fill our pockets."

Her tone was a bitter thing. Even in the College there were some who'd looked down on Kilian for her pale skin. Blood of traitors and invaders, that was the whisper that followed all of the Duni. Born of the last of the Miezans in Praes and kept light by intermingling with the crusaders who'd once occupied most of the Empire.

"She wouldn't have had to turn Nilin," the Quartermaster said, "if she owned him from the start."

Kilian looked ill at the thought.

"He was my *friend*, Ratface," she said. "We used to trade books, since neither of us could afford much. And you're telling me he was lying that whole time? Gods, we almost got together during our first year at the College."

He'd never been good with emotions, so he remained silent. Eventually she sighed.

"Cat took his death hard, you know? She didn't want to talk about it, but she wouldn't look Nauk in the eyes for weeks afterwards."

Ratface had noticed. They all had. There was a reason Catherine Foundling's men loved her – she repaid that loyalty just as fiercely.

"If I'm right," he said, "Nauk is going to take it hard."

The redhead cursed under her breath. "I hadn't even thought of that. They were like brothers, these two. He relied so much on Nilin to run his kabili."

And that was the heart of the matter, wasn't it? Ratface was under no illusion he could find anything the agents of the Scribe could not, but how deep would they really dig when it came to a mere Senior Tribune? One who had so little to do with Catherine directly? But Nilin hadn't just been a Senior Tribune, he'd been Nauk's closest friend. Anything the orc learned in the highest councils of the Fifteenth he would then be told. *Access to information above that of his rank.* Even Named could make miss details.

"So you've got a name," Kilian said. "What now?"

"Now," the olive-skinned bastard grimaced, "we talk to Aisha."

—

"You think Nilin was the traitor," the Staff Tribune immediately said, face thoughtful.

Many things could be said about Aisha Bishara – and he'd thought even more, some of them perhaps a little too rose-tinted – but that she was slow on the uptake was one of them. Some days he wondered why they'd lasted so long as a couple, when they'd both known going in that they disagreed on nearly everything of import. The sex had probably held it together past its natural lifespan, he thought. That part of the relationship had always been an unequivocal success. Ratface directed his thoughts elsewhere before his body could stir at the memory of it.

"I'm hoping he was not," he said. "But it needs to be looked into nonetheless."

The other Taghreb nodded sharply.

"He was from Dula, right? The small city in Aksum territory."

Kilian cocked her head to the side. "You know people there?"

"I have a cousin," Aisha replied vaguely.

The Bishara family's glory days were long gone, Ratface knew, but the bloodline was still prestigious. One of their ancient chieftains was said to have wed the daughter of a djinn prince, and though the creature blood ran thin nowadays it was still purer than in a lot of more powerful families. Aisha could still put her hand into an open brazier and feel no pain, or spend an entire day under the sun of the Devouring Sands and not have her skin burn. That meant the sons and daughter of the Bishara line made good consorts for nobles looking to improve their blood rather than make a strong alliance, and that in turn meant Aisha had relatives scattered all over the Empire.

For a Soninke that might not have meant much – they murdered even family over minor titles – but for the Taghreb it was different. The tribe, even if it was no longer called that, always came first. No matter who you married, no matter how many years had passed. Unless you were a mere bastard, of course. Then getting rid of you was just good planning. Ratface smiled so that the poisonous fury he felt would not show. They had to leave the tent while she got in touch with her relative and they got in touch with their own contacts, but within a bell they had their answer. Kadun Lombo had been, it appeared, nothing more than a minor official. No known ties to a higher authority.

"Two details, though," Aisha said. "First, when he sponsored Nilin there were rumours he was a distant relative."

Kilian's eyes sharpened. "Nilin was an only child, and so were his parents. He used to joke about it. Said it ran in the family."

From the well-hidden look of surprise on Aisha's face, Ratface guessed she hadn't known that. She'd only been trying to be thorough. *But she has that tone of victory, so she found something else. Something relevant.*

"Second, Kadun Lombo had a riding accident in the month following his sponsoring."

The Quartermaster let out a long breath. He'd hoped. Against the mounting evidence, he'd hoped.

"A loose end being tied up," he said.

"It's standard practice when placing a long-term spy," Aisha said quietly. "Getting rid of anyone who could possibly give them away. The Truebloods have people in the Legions, that much is a fact. He might have been an investment from the High Lady of Aksum – he certainly had the talent to rise into someone's general staff. It could be any of them, for that matter. They all have the resources to pull off something like this."

Them. The Truebloods. The War College did try to weed infiltrators out, or at least identify them, but some inevitably got through. Not enough to ever cripple the army if there was a rebellion, but definitely enough that the Truebloods would remain appraised of what the Legions were up to.

"Circumstantial evidence," Ratface finally said. "We need more. All we have right now is an odd report and speculation."

Aisha eyed him with unpleasantly familiar disappointment.

"You were handed an inaccurate report and you just noticed? Perhaps Juniper is right and we *do* need to audit your books."

That the Hellhound was out to get him was not news. She'd disapproved of he and Aisha getting involved back in the day and taken no pains whatsoever to hide it. To the extent that she'd said as much to his face. Several times. In retrospective, she might have raised some valid points. It did not make Ratface any fonder of her.

"I only got it when Nilin died, and it dated back to Summerholm," he said a touch sharply.

"Why?" Kilian interrupted before Aisha could respond. "Why only then?"

Ratface paused. "I don't actually know. Hakram was the one to give the scroll to me, after Nilin died. Catherine told him to handle the whole thing since Nauk was too upset to get it done."

Aisha shrugged, somehow managing to make the mundane gesture elegant. He really wished she wasn't as good as that, or at being beautiful in general.

"Let's ask Deadhand for answers."

--

Hakram was not sleeping. Ratface was not convinced Adjutant ever slept – he certainly got an amount of work done that implied he was beyond such mortal foibles. The orc was paying shatranj with Apprentice and apparently beating the Warlock's son handily. Both of the Named made him uncomfortable, though for very different reasons. He'd known Hakram before the orc had stepped into the realm of legend. Before he'd become Deadhand, the first orc with a Name in over a millennium. It was hard to reconcile the sergeant who'd used to badly hide his contraband alcohol with the warrior who was followed by hushed whispers from greenskins wherever he went, a demigod in the flesh to his people. As for Apprentice, well... No one who'd ever seen the mage at work would ever be comfortable around him. At Three Hills he'd turned an entire flank into a frozen wasteland of death and at Marchford he'd lit up the entire night sky with his wrath. So much power contained in the chubby frame of a mild-mannered bespectacled man, always at the tip of his fingers.

"Adjutant," he greeted them. "Lord Apprentice."

Hakram's eyes swept over Aisha and Kilian before settling on him. The orc clicked his tongue over the roof of his mouth, the gesture strangely human.

"You're hunting our rat," Hakram said.

"There'll be more than one," Aisha replied. "But in essence you are correct. We think we've identified a leak."

"That explains all the scrying that's been going on," Apprentice said. "I was going to have to ask questions about that."

The man was distinctly indifferent when he mentioned it, toying with a new trinket in his braids. The bone amulet Catherine had made. He was only aware of its existence because she'd killed an oxen to craft it and the report had made it to his metaphorical desk.

"I got a pile of documents after Nilin died," he said. "Among them was a parchment, apart from the rest. Why was it?"

Hakram hummed.

"It was found in his personal effects, not the papers for the kabili," he said. "Hence why you got it later than the others."

Kilian let out a sharp breath. "Ratface. You said what tipped you off was that there were odd numbers in the report."

He nodded slowly.

"Adjutant," she continued. "The parchment, did you find it in a book?"

The tall orc's eyes were hard now, and cold. "Yes."

Nilin's personal affairs had been inherited by Nauk but they were held in one of the carts in the baggage train, all of which were under Ratface's authority. Hakram pointed out the right book and from there it was only a matter of time until they figured out the cypher. Numbers for the page, the last letter of the word for the first letter of the word it actually meant. The message outlined the number of deserters in the Fifteenth to have disappeared in the wake of the fight with the heroes as well as the casualties incurred that night. It ended with a suggestion of what might be the Fifteenth's next assignment, namely the suppression of the Silver Spears.

"If it's still here, it was never handed in," Aisha said afterwards.

And yet Heiress had known where to find them and when. The implications of that were unpleasant.

—

Ratface grabbed a few hours of sleep before dawn came. He'd been unofficially mandated to be the one who would tell Catherine, much to his displeasure. She wasn't the kind of woman who took her displeasure at bad news on the messenger but this was not a duty he looked forward to. Not when he'd had to see that guilty look on her face for weeks after Nilin's death, when she thought no one was looking. The Squire had gotten up before he did, he found out. Dressed in a simple tunic and leggings she was sparring with five men from her freshly appointed personal guard, the so-called Gallowborne. The Callowans eyed him with distrust as he claimed a seat just to the side of the sparring ring, several of them moving behind him without a word. It was almost endearing how much Catherine was unaware of the fact that she fucking terrified people, he reflected.

The Squire was undefeated in battle, that was part of it, but it was the things she'd *done* that gave people the shivers. She'd torched Summerholm to flush out a hero barely two months out of

Laure, killed a monster the size of a fortress with her bare hands and even being being crippled had failed to slow her down – apparently she'd strolled into the host of devils at Marchford and casually killed their leaders without sustaining a single wound. Hells, she'd taken a handful of Named into battle with a demon and wiped the floor with the thing for half an hour straight in front of hundreds of witnesses. That wasn't the part that really scared the Truebloods, though. It was the way she seemed to gather talent around her effortlessly. She'd brought the most promising student in the history of the War College into the fold with a single conversation. She'd picked a nobody as her liaison and in a matter of months he'd become the Adjutant. The son of the Sovereign of the Red Skies took orders from her. She'd taken a *company of deserters* into battle against devils and somehow turned them into loyal hardened killers.

Men of the Gallowborne had been on report twice since Marchford for beating a man bloody for disparaging Catherine. The second time, when it had been implied the only reason the Black Knight had taken her in was to keep his bed warm, the legionary had to have all of his teeth grown back by a healer. Armoured boots were not a forgiving weapon. And now he was watching a woman his own age toy with five veterans like they were children, somehow making them run into each other without ever going quicker than at a walk. She'd mentioned once that she'd never used a sword before leaving Laure and Ratface honestly had trouble believing it. He's known people who practiced the sword since they could walk who weren't half that dangerous with one, and that was without even taking her uncanny reflexes into consideration. The Fifteenth had not even existed for a year and already it worshipped at the altar of Catherine Foundling – you only needed to hear the song already written about Three Hills to know that.

Squire stopped before her men were too bruised to walk, clapping them on the shoulder amicably before dismissing them. Ratface idly wondered how many of them were already in love with her. Her relationship with Kilian was not common knowledge – he'd made sure of that – and Named always attracted admirers the way carrion attracted flies. She wiped her face with a wet cloth, though she didn't look particularly sweaty, and then finally noticed him. Catherine Foundling was not a strikingly beautiful woman, he decided: her face was sharp, almost austere unless she smiled. Her most attractive feature was the long hair that she kept in a loose ponytail. The Deoraithe colouring lent her touch of the exotic, admittedly, but compared to the likes of the Heiress there was no contest. And yet she had a strange charm of her own. *Charisma, not beauty.*

"Ratface," she greeted him with a smile.

She eyed him thoughtfully after that.

"And you look like you just killed my horse, which seems a bit over the top since it's already dead. All right, Supply Tribune, ruin my morning. I'm about due a nasty surprise."

The Taghreb bastard cleared his throat.

"We've found one of the spies. You're not going to like it."

She didn't, but she listened anyway.

Chapter 39: Countdown

"Maybe I won't go to Heaven but you've never owned a pit full of man-eating tapirs so who's the real loser here?"

– Dread Empress Atrocious, best known for comprehensive tax reform and having been eaten by man-eating tapirs. They were later executed by her successor for treason after a lengthy trial.

Liesse was almost too pretty to be a real city.

The walls circling the city were forty feet high, a concession to the invasions that had plagued Callow since its inception, but they were also white or pale tan stone, with ornate crenellation sculpted to look like mated pairs of swans. That was the city's unofficial name, among Callowans: Liesse, City of Swans. The jewel of the south, never marred by war. That was a myth, of course. When the Dukes of Liesse had still been kings they'd been brought forcefully into the fold by the fledgling Alban dynasty based in Laure and then then slapped down twice when they rebelled for independence. Under the later Fairfax dynasty they'd settled down, but the south had always looked to Liesse for instructions first. That was the whole reason Duke Gaston had been able to serve as a figurehead for the rebellion in the first place. They'd never had to throw back a Praesi army, though, and that showed in how the city had been built. A third of the city stood outside the gates, mostly trades like tanners and dyers that would have stained the pretty inside with their stink and mess. Poorer folk had shacks too, though, those who couldn't afford the stone houses of the city proper.

It was not enough to spoil the sight. The city was all wide main avenues covered in flowers and trees, garlands hanging everywhere and sparrows flying from one church to another. While Liesse, unlike Laure, did not have a proper cathedral it had no less than seven smaller basilicas. The House of Light had a strong presence in the south, where it had grown in strength unchecked while its northern chapters

were struggling to strike a balance with royal authority. Southern Callow was full of monasteries and rural chapels, all of which had fallen on hard times after the Conquest. My teacher had not outlawed worship of the Heavens – he'd been well aware he'd be dealing with constant rebellions if he did. Instead he'd repealed all the exemptions the House of Light had been granted under the Kingdom and made them just as subject as property taxes as everybody else. The brothers and sisters didn't work for coin or keep it, though, it was a religious obligation for them. So they had to rely on donations from Callowans, who grew to resent having to pay for the upkeep of grand cathedrals and sprawling churches from their own pockets.

Here in the south the monasteries had been the worse off, with their cloistered communities suddenly forced to sell the wine and crops they'd once offered people for free. The priests couldn't even do that themselves, they'd had to ask lay brothers and sisters to do it for them. Inevitably some unscrupulous bastards had managed to get some of the jobs and the ensuing scandals had further diminished the credibility of people who spent their whole lives interceding for others with the Heavens and offering free healing to all those that needed it. I'd never been a great admirer of the House of Light – they asked too many questions and their horses were a little too high for my tastes – but I did not approve what the Empire was doing to it. Priests saved lives all over my homeland every day and forcing them to focus on worldly matters was of no help to anyone but the Imperial coffers. I understood the political necessity of damaging their credibility with Callowans, since they'd be a hotbed for rebellion otherwise, but pushing them towards uselessness was not the answer.

I'd rather they be legally mandated to provide healing away from their own churches for a set amount of months a year, where they might make a positive impact but not become entrenched in the community. The Heavens weren't going anywhere, I'd have to make my accommodations with them.

"Pondering an assault?" Pickler probed, coming to stand besides me.

I'd called for my Senior Sapper earlier. We were less than half a day away from Liesse proper, and now that we were in sight of the ramparts I wanted her take on how the siege should proceed. Juniper and I had our own notions, but a fresh set of eyes was never a bad thing.

"We'll bombard them first," I replied. "We've got more hours to spare than men. I want them as softened up as possible before we go in."

With Black keeping the Countess Marchford busy we had free reign in the are. I'd expected to have to watch out for raids the moment we got within a fortnight of Liesse but all we'd seen so far was outriders. The lack of resistance bothered me. The Lone Swordsman had holed up everyone he could behind the walls, and that was a *lot* of mouths to feed. Even with full granaries that meant he had only a couple of months before starvation set in. Maybe he understood I couldn't afford to let the siege go on this long. *Or maybe he's still got cards up his sleeve.* That was the problem with William: he was an idealistic idiot, up until he started carving sinister messages in people's foreheads. The combination of high-minded rhetoric and brutal terror tactics had proved a surprisingly potent mix.

"We won't be able to collapse the walls entirely without taking out the houses," Pickler said. "But we wouldn't need to – we just collapse the upper half, which'll be much easier, and then we build ramps up to that using the shacks. How costly going up those ramps will be depends on the amount of siege weapons they'll have."

They wouldn't have much, I knew. Callow had never been a great user of those. The Kingdom had only rarely waged offensive wars and the few cities that did use siege weapons had fielded them to counter Praesi ones. Summerholm had plenty ballistas and small trebuchets, rote models imported from the Kingdom Under. Dormer and the Red Flower Vales, as the other Callowan marches, had been similarly garnished. Liesse, though, Liesse had not had to deal with an enemy army in several hundred years. Unless the rebels had bought siege weapons through Mercantis they'd have next to none.

"It's not the siege weapons that worry me, it's the army," I said.

The only professional soldiers inside the city would be the Stygian phalanx and the Baroness Dormer's retinue, but that wouldn't matter. Not with a hero leading them, a hero I couldn't even face directly: my pattern of three with the Lone Swordsman was coming to a close, and that one was supposed to be his victory. Funny thing, though, the word 'victory'. Covered a whole range of meanings, some of which left me standing with all my limbs intact at the end of them. And when the pattern was done, well... William and I no longer had Fate pulling our asses out of the fire. It was anybody's game then, and while he might flatly outclass me with a sword there was more to my arsenal than that.

"Heroes can accomplish strange and terrible feats," Pickler finally said, shaking me out of my thoughts. "They'll survive nearly anything. What they *can't* do is save their armies from being pounded into mulch by artillery."

There was a fervent light in the goblin's eyes, her usually placid face split with a hungry smile.

"Before the sappers were made into a corps, we were just knight-fodder," Pickler said. "But oh, the things we've learned since then. A man can only swing a sword as hard as man can. A goblin behind a machine can pulverize a fortress."

She turned to look at the walls of Liesse and for once I thought she looked as full of malice as Robber.

"They fight with their arms, Lady Squire," she said. "We fight with our minds. Clever beats strong every time."

I understood why she needed to believe that, and so did not contradict her. But in my experience, there was a threshold of strength that pure cleverness could not triumph over. I'd learned that in the Pit, taking one hit for every ten I landed and still ending up the one unconscious in the mud. Sometimes you were too small, too weak, too light for your traps to matter much. It was not a pleasant thought and I tried not to linger too long on it. I'd been in a foul mood all day, ever since I'd learned... well, that was another unpleasant thought I was trying not to linger on. The betrayal still felt too fresh, even if it had apparently been an old one.

"At the moment we don't believe Heiress will betray us in the early stages of the siege," I told my Senior Sapper. "One of the things I wanted to talk you about was contingencies for-"

There waves. Not just ripples but *waves*, coming from the south. My eyes turned to the city, still looking peaceful, but it had to be a lie. This was major, an even stronger presence than when Heiress had let the demon out. I could feel my Name howling in anger, fighting back a presence anathema to it.

"Fucking Hells," Pickler gasped. "What is that?"

I eyed her in dismay. If I'd felt that because I was Named it was one thing, but the goblin was as mundane as it got. If even she could feel what was going on in Liesse, what were dealing with?

"I don't know," I said. "But we've got people who might."

—

I kept the meeting as small as it could possibly be.

Juniper, of course, Hakram as my second and Apprentice as someone who could give answers. Heiress did not grant me the same courtesy: she brought her entire

entourage. Fadila Mbafeno, a Soninke mage I'd already met in the Tower and that Masego had told me since was one of the most promising casters of their generation. Barika Unonti, whose finger I'd broken during the same meeting and was now eyeing me with poorly-veiled hatred. She was a mage too, and heiress to a lordship sworn to Wolof. The only Taghreb among her minions I also knew already, though Aisha had been the one to tell me his name: Ghassan Enazah, a lord in his own right sworn to Kahtan. Which put him in an awkward position, since he was openly a member of the Truebloods while his liege lady was an ally of the Empress'. The Taghreb were a fractious people, though, Aisha had told me. The High Lady of Foramen might have been one of the Truebloods but half her vassals were aligned with Malicia, the same holding true for the High Lady of Kahtan's loyalist allegiances compared to her dependents'. The last two were the important ones, though. Not powerful in their own right but because of who they'd become in a few years: Fasili Mirembe, heir to the High Lordship of Aksum and Hawulti Sahel, heiress to the High Ladyship of Nok. Two major imperial cities, fully-fledged kingdoms before the Miezens came from across the Tyrian sea.

Not a single one of them was ugly. None as good-looking as Heiress herself, but it showed that Praesi aristocrats bred for looks as well as magic and lineage. I was used to feeling plain, though, so I put the envy aside easily. Their looks had come at too high a price anyway. Akua's little minions stood behind her as she claimed the seat across from me, somehow draping herself across a folding chair like it was a godsdamned throne. If her dress wasn't exquisite red silk from the Yan Tei lands I'd eat my own fingers: she was wearing a bloody fortune on her body, and said fortune was displaying her prominent cleavage. I'd long made my peace with the fact that I'd never grow into anything like those, but would it have killed her to wear a godsdamned collar for once? The heiress to Wolof smirked at me. One day, maybe even soon, she would die on a fire. Those tits wouldn't show on a fucking skeleton, would they?

"This is an emergency meeting, so spare me the smarm," I said.

"I will, of course, give you exactly the respect you are due," Heiress said.

Her acolytes smirked as a group like they'd practice it.

"See, that's exactly what I'm talking about," I smiled. "You mouth off like that again, and I'll execute one of your little hanger-ons at random."

That certainly got rid of the smirks, though they condensed on Juniper's face instead. I checked on Hakram from the corner of my eye: he was immersed in a staring contest with the Ghassan lordling. He'd been the commander of Heiress'

host when she'd still had a host, I remembered. He'd been in charge when her Proceran mercenaries had been whipped bloody by the Stygians, though he'd apparently got off without a single wound to show for that defeat. If he wanted to start a rivalry with my Adjutant he was in for an even rougher ride.

"That would be a grievous abuse of your authority," Heiress said sharply.

"So complain to the guy I answer to," I shrugged. "Oh wait, that's Black. And he'd pat me on the back and call it a good day's work. Allow me to be perfectly clear, Akua. *I am in no mood to be fucked with.*"

The last part came out as a bark and to my satisfaction several of her minions flinched at the sound.

"You've been summoned here because, though you might be constant pain in my ass, you might have something to contribute."

I paused.

"Actually, now that I think of it, this is my godsdamned meeting and you're the only who could be useful. All of you Wasteland brats, get out of my tent."

Several of them opened their mouths but I raised a finger.

"At random," I reminded them.

"Make them draw lots," Juniper suggested.

"Hear that, we've even got a method now," I smiled savagely.

"Don't kill Mbefano, she'll be useful during the siege," Apprentice spoke up lazily.

"Hear that, Fadila?" I said. "You get an exemption. Feel free to speak up, someone else will get the axe."

Fadila did not, in fact, take me up on my offer. She did look like she'd been force-fed a barrel of lemons, but given that she'd been the one allegedly in contact with several of the mage spies in the Fifteenth she was lucky I wasn't having her drawn and quartered on principle. I was only allowing that stay of execution for so long, though. If she didn't hightail back to Praes the moment we took Liesse, it was the quick stop and the sudden drop for Lady Mbefano. She was on my list, now. After checking in with Heiress, who gave them a curt nod, the lordlings filed out of the tent in a huff and puff of offended noble privilege. Hakram was showing the barest edge of his teeth in what was either a display of amusement or hunger. The line between those two was might thing with orcs.

"Have you finished throwing your tantrum?" Heiress asked flatly.

"I don't know," I said. "Have you finished bringing in your fucking posse at important staff meetings? I'm trying to work with you, Akua, but if you want to turn this into a pissing contest don't get snippy when I put you in your place. You're just a commander, here. Lesser than even Nauk and Hune, because they have more troops and *they've never summoned a demon in the middle of a city full of civilians.*"

Yeah, I wasn't going to let that go anytime soon. Maybe when she was dead, and even then I'd probably deface her tombstone with the words "A demon? *Really?*".

"I tire of you saddling me with the responsibility with your blunders," Heiress sighed.

I would have believed her had I, you know, not not summoned a demon. That kind of damaged her credibility. Still, it was a testament to how skilled a liar she was that I almost wanted to to trust her version of things.

"That conversation's not going anywhere, so let's put it aside," I said. "We've got a bigger problem now. Masego?"

"That ripple in Creation came straight from Liesse," Apprentice said, pushing himself up in his seat. "It was angelic in nature."

Juniper barked out a laugh.

"We whipped the get of Hells already," she said. "I suppose we were due a fight with the other side of the field."

"Your are overly simplifying matters," Heiress said, and to my surprise this was not wrapped in a coating of insinuation.

She was actually contributing, would you look at that. Any time soon we'd be buddies, except that apparently she'd owned Nilin body and soul since the beginning and I'd thought he was *my friend* and – I stopped when I heard the table splintering, every eye on the room on me. I took my hand off the wood, sweeping away the shards.

"Continue," I ordered.

"The Hells and the Heavens are equivalent only in terms of absolute might, not numbers," Heiress said warily. "Devils are endless and ever-spawning, but angels are a set and allegedly unchangeable number. Divided in Choirs, they can never be more or less than they have always been and always will be."

"So we won't have to deal with a swarm of comically naked cherubim," I said.

The House of Light taught these were the among the most powerful of angels, associated with the Choirs of Compassion and Fortitude. A few hundred years back, though a Proceran mosaic artist had displayed those mighty angels as chubby naked sexless flying sprites. Like all Proceran fancies that one had spread across the continent, to the mild amusement of many a priest. No one reacted to my joke, so I grimaced and kept quiet. Likely the only one with enough schooling in the Book of All Things to get it was Masego, and we had different takes on humour. Since I'd put explosives in his hair, I was willing to cut Apprentice a little slack on that front.

"If it were a cherub we were dealing with, we'd be in a great deal more trouble," Heiress said.

"She's right," Masego said. "I don't know exactly what we're dealing with, but it's not that high up in the Choirs."

"You both speak," Juniper said slowly, "as if we'd personally have to deal with this angel."

Masego eyed Heiress, who smiled charmingly at him. He ignored it. I was, I reflected, rather lucky that Apprentice was a great deal more interested in dissections than women. Or men, for that matter. Warlock's son seemed to regard all of those matters with a certain intellectual disdain, as if he couldn't possibly fathom why anyone would do anything so unhygienic.

"I thought it was obvious to everyone," Apprentice said. "Someone is trying to bring an angel into Creation."

"Seventh Choir," Heiress added. "The Hashmallim, appointed rulers of the Choir of Contrition."

Masego seemed surprise. "You're certain?"

"I have tools you don't," she replied flatly.

"Seventh Choir," Apprentice repeated. "So that's how long we have."

Juniper leaned forward. "You can give me an estimate?"

"Seven times seven hours," Heiress said. "And then an Angel of Contrition will grace Liesse with its presence."

Oh, I didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Practically speaking, what does that mean?" I asked.

"It won't be there for long," Masego said. "But anyone within forty-nine miles will be made... contrite."

"What he means," Heiress said, "is that anyone without a Name in that range will be confronted with all their 'sins' until they're broken to the will of the Heavens. The last time a Hashmallim touched the world, three hundred thousand people picked up a sword and fought until they reached the capital of the Kingdom of the Dead."

"If that angel comes into Creation," Apprentice said quietly, "every soul in Liesse, and the Fifteenth with them, will form the tip of the spear for the Tenth Crusade."

Heroic Interlude: Prise au Fer

"There is nowhere angels fear to tread."
– Callowan proverb

William's mother had been a woman of some education, a knight's daughter. His father had only barely known how to read and always deeply distrusted any writing but the Book of All Things, which was said to have been spoken to the minds of mortal men by the Gods. It had been his mother who'd taught him his numbers and letters, and she'd been the one to keep his attention on the lessons by weaving stories from ancient Callowan rulers into them. The Queen of Blades had been the kind of vivid story that fascinated, never once defeated in battle though her invasion of Daoine had failed. So had the story of Eleanor Fairfax, the knight turned founder of the Fairfax dynasty who'd risen in rebellion against Triumphant when the Dread Empress had ruled over the entire continent. Now, though, as he walked the streets of Liesse alone and the moon was high in the sky, it was a king's words he remembered. So had spoken Jehan the Wise: "Evil is cruel, and so men think it follows that Good is kind. This is a mistake, my son. Though fire is warm and in the dark of night we huddle around it, it also *burns*."

This had unsettled him, as a child. Jehan had been Named, the Good King. A hero. Why be so wary of the very power he wielded? He understood now. Had ever since he'd gone into the wilderness half-mad and been presented with the face of Contrition. He'd seen the searing fires and felt them scour his soul clear. There were sorceries in the East – and even in some of the Free Cities – that could make a slave of a man. There were some who would compare standing in the presence of a Hashmallim to such a thing, but that was a fundamental misunderstanding of the thing. William had seen his life through their eyes. Every sin, every wrong, every petty unthinking cruelty. All of it without the veil of lies everyone cloaked themselves in without even realizing it. The lies of well-meaning and wilfully chosen ignorance. It had

stripped William of his delusions and allowed him to see what he truly was.

Just a man, and not a particularly Good one.

He'd gone through those fires and come out a sword of the Heavens, handed a single feather from the wing of Contrition to see its will done upon Creation. Had they known, even then? Perhaps they had. Angels saw deeper into the nature of the world than mortals could, beyond artificial constructs like time. There was, to them, no difference between the first step of a journey and the last. That was what really changed people, when they met angels. The realization that in the end they were nothing but an assembly of sins. Choirs helped you accept this truth differently. Those touched by Compassion never took another life again, not even those of the worst monsters in Creation. Those touched by Mercy spent their days alleviating suffering wherever they went. Those touched by Judgement... did not survive the experience, should they be found wanting. Contrition was different from the others, in a sense.

The Hashmallim had never once forced anyone to take up the sword to fight Evil, but then they'd never once had to ask. Once you saw the truth of yourself and then the truth of Creation, what was left but to take arms? The only path to contrition was to leave the world a better place than you'd found it – and how could lesser solutions be tolerated when so large a part of Calernia was still under the yoke of the Gods Below?

Nine crusades had been waged, all in all. Of those, five had been led by heroes aligned to the Choir of Contrition. Sometimes it amused William that the red cross that was the mark of all crusaders had been a symbol provided by the Dread Empire. Triumphant, in all her cruel madness, had been fond of having children crucify their own parents as a sign of obeisance. She'd paid for it eventually, when a Duchess of Daoine who'd consigned her own father to the cross met with an idealistic young knight named Eleanor Fairfax. Eleanor had been touched by Contrition, and when she rose in rebellion all of the continent gathered behind her banner and carried it all the way to the foot of the Tower. In the beginning only the Duchess' soldiers had worn the cross, but symbols spread – by the time Triumphant's empire was pulled down on her head every man and woman in that army had a scrap of red cloth sown on their clothes. Or branded into their skin.

And so the First Crusade came to an end. The Second came when the Praesi rose in revolt against the crusader kingdoms their realm had been divided into, and they were crushed into dust. When the Wastelanders rose the second time, though, they were led by the man who would become Dread Emperor Terribilis II. The Third Crusade ended in disaster and the end of the crusader nations –

to further compound the disgrace, a weakened Callow was occupied by Procer in its wake. The Fourth Crusade, a last-ditch attempt to reclaim Praes, was drowned in such a sea of blood by Terribilis that never again was a crusade to turn East. After that the four crusades that followed were led by the hand of Contrition. Failures, all of them, for they were fighting the Dead King and his realm of horrors, a monster who called even devils to heel. Of those it was the Seventh Crusade that William found important, for as far as he knew it was the only time in the history of Calernia a Hashmallim had come into Creation.

Contrition had touched Salia, the capital of the Principate of Procer, and every soul inside had taken the cross – including the First Prince of the time. The rest of the continent had gathered behind that holy host, and for a time it seemed the endless hordes of the dead would finally run out. Siege was laid to Keter, the seat of the Dead King and ancient capital of his derelict kingdom. They'd lost, in the end. The Dead King has poisoned the land and called forth infernal hosts until there was nothing left standing in front of him but bones. But they'd come close. Liesse was smaller than Salia, only a hundred thousand people lived within the walls, but it was not the Kingdom of the Dead it would fight. Malicia was no great warlord, not the way Terribilis had been, and her greatest general was getting old. Sooner or later, a hero would finally manage to slay the Black Knight.

The First Prince of Procer was plotting a Tenth Crusade, holed up in her capital, and William would give it to her. But it would not be a Proceran enterprise, and it would not end with Callow as her protectorate. The rest of Calernia would not stand for that sin being committed a second time. The Lone Swordsman came upon the shores of the Hengest lake and looked up at the stars, breathing out slowly. There were small docks with fishing boats further down the waterside but that would not take him where he was headed. Every Callowan child knew there was a holy place somewhere in the waters, an island said to be untouched by war and the depredations of time alike. An island, it was said, but none could be seen from the city. Boots in the sand, William watched the shining waters and waited.

The white ship came, a small thing rowboat without any trace of an oar. It did not float so much as glide, the swan-shaped prow and stern almost lifelike. It beached in front of him and without a word William climbed on board, sitting on the only seat. It had been a clear night out but the ship led them into mist. How long he sat there alone with only the dark waters and the mist for company, he could not say. He'd been into Arcadia Resplendent, where time ran to a different stream than in Creation, but this was different. Whatever lay ahead was not in another realm, just a part of this one mortals were not lightly given access to. The Penitent's Blade, always at his hip, was warm to the touch. It

felt the proximity of its likeness. An angel had died in the waters of the Hengest, the legend went. He would soon find out the truth of that. He didn't see the island until they were almost upon it, to his surprise. Pale sands formed a perfect circle in the water, entirely bare for a small chapel of roughly hewn stone.

William had been to Laure before and seen its beautiful cathedrals. He'd seen the many basilicas of the south, for that matter, and the outrageous wealth and splendour of Salia – capital of the mightiest nation on Calernia. For all that, the sight of that small chapel brought out... something in him. A sense of wonder. There were no grand materials or sculptures: it was, in truth, little more than a stone house with a pointed ceiling and a tower. The ship beached on the sands in perfect silence and the Lone Swordsman stepped onto the shore. There was, he now saw, no bell in the tower. Yet there was an empty space for one, a bar of ancient wood to hang it from. It was the first imperfection he'd glimpsed here, and he almost frowned at the sight. Dismissing the thought, he strode inside through the open door.

There were seven rows of benches on each side, little more than bare slabs of stone. No murals on the walls or paintings on the ceiling. Even the window in the back was without stained glass, revealing only endless waters blanked by swirling mists. For all that, he felt a little awed. The chapel felt unearthly, more than even Arcadia had. It was too real. The stone was the very essence of stone, the air the very essence of air: the only intruder here was him, a living imperfection in an otherwise flawless scene. Beyond the benches lay a small altar of pale stone, with a single mark on it. A sigil. It was a sinuous, complicated thing but his mind could not help but perceive it as the number three, in Miezan numerals. The Penitent's Blade was so warm it almost burned his fingers when he touched the handle.

"You know what happens next, don't you?"

Almorava's voice was soft, almost kind. He was not surprised she'd turned up, though he glanced in her direction nonetheless. She was seated to his right, for once without a bottle in hand. Even she would not desecrate this place with idle drinking.

"The sword goes into the stone," he said. "I may not know stories the way you do, but I know that."

He'd also stay in prayer until dawn. There would be exactly seven hours left before the sun rose, no matter when he started praying. These things saw themselves into being.

"I wonder what the last hero though, when they called on Contrition," he said quietly. "If they had doubts, too."

"She didn't," Almorava replied. "The White Knight was in Salia, when the Dead King's offer came. Five hundred children every year for peace on the borders. That the First Prince even considered it had her in such disgust she did it that very same night."

He didn't ask how she knew that. He wasn't sure he'd liked the answer. Heroes were bound to the lifespan of a mortal, unlike villains, but the Wandering Bard had always known too much about things she seemed much too young to ever have witnessed with her own eyes. Perhaps it was part of her Name. *Perhaps it is something else entirely.*

"A better woman than me, then," William said. "I know what I will be putting them through. It is not a gentle thing."

"Good doesn't have to be nice," Almorava murmured. "Just righteous."

The Lone Swordsman remained standing, looking at the pale stone and the sigil on it.

"She could take the Fifteenth out of range," he finally said. "Forty-nine hours is more than enough time."

"She won't, though," the Bard replied. "That's not her nature. She's the very worst kind of villain, you see – the kind who thinks they're doing the right thing. In that sense, she's even more dangerous than her teacher. He doesn't labour under that impression."

"And us?" he asked. "Are we also just clutching a delusion? I had a talk with Thief, before coming here. She told me she's staying for the siege, but that she'll be leaving Callow afterwards."

Some vestige of amusement quirked his lips.

"She was, I believe, quite disgusted with me."

"Thief sees Creation through the lens of her Name," Almorava said. "That allows her more clarity than you'd think, but people with her kind of Role are not meant to look at a broader picture. She fights what she perceives as injustice wherever she sees it, but she'll never root out the causes."

The same, he thought, could be said of so many heroes. Theirs was a losing fight, from the onset. You could bring down the mighty who abused their power, turn back the great tides of Evil that would sweep over mankind, but how could a single person change the world? There was a reason for that, he believed. The Heavens had put the Fate of mankind in the hands of mankind, not the Named. Heroes, given extraordinary abilities, were meant to deal with extraordinary threats. Not to take the reins of the world.

"There are no root causes," he said tiredly. "Or only one, if you prefer. People are people, with all the flaws that come with that. We strive to do Good and fall short, because we're not meant for perfection. Sometimes I wonder if it's all just a great jest at our expense, Almorava. If they placed a better world just out of our reach so that they can watch us try and fail to touch it."

The Bard hummed. "Did you know it's a matter of some debate among the priests of the House of Light whether or not Evil is inherent to the soul?"

William was Liessen: of course he knew that. Even after the Conquest the brothers and sisters were everywhere in the south of Callow, and their public debates on theological matters were considered a good show in most villages. People actually travelled to witness famous debaters at work. There was a great deal of betting involved, which was a lot less pious, but people tended to remember the arguments made even after money changed hands.

"Are you about to impart some great revelation onto me?" he asked. "That debate has been raging for as long as the House has stood, and some say the priests who built it were arguing as they lay the stones."

"I think it's a very interesting question, when you look at the current breed of villains we're dealing with," the Bard said. "There's only three that matter: the Empress, the Knight and the Squire."

Almorava raised a finger.

"Malicia has made a point of improving the lot of common Callowans whenever she can. Purely out of self-interest, but she does it nonetheless."

She raised a second finger.

"The Big Guy is stricter about enforcing those laws of the old kingdom he kept than the Fairfaxes were before him. He's not gentle about it, but he keeps order and enforces something that looks like justice if you squint a bit."

A third finger.

"Foundling. Well, you've met her yourself. She thinks she's saving Callow. You could argue her intentions are heroic, even if she's a little more complicated than that."

"You despise the Empire even more than I do," the hero frowned. "Yet this seems like a fairly impassioned defence of it."

"The thing is, William," she said, ignoring his interjection. "They're not the first villains to ever win a few battles. It's without precedent for the Empire to keep Callow for over twenty years, though. Why are they different?"

"We've never dealt with villains quite as skilled who did not compulsively backstab each other," the Lone Swordsman said. "Or get killed by rivals."

"That's another thing, yes," Almorava said. "There's loyalty there. Affection, even. Not traits you usually associate with villains. Not that they're incapable of them, but Names magnify everything you are – and you don't get to shake hands with the Gods Below by being a choir boy."

"I don't follow your point," William admitted.

"These are some of the most successful villains in the history of the Empire," she said. "And they became that by going through the motions of being Good."

The dark-haired man's brow rose. "They are most definitely not."

"Oh, I'm not arguing that they are," the Bard said. "See, I think that we *are* born Evil. Because Evil is instinct. It's that animal part of us that wants things for ourselves no matter what it does to others. It's been dressed up in philosophy since, but that's the heart of it."

She smiled mirthlessly.

"But I want to believe that when the Gods made us, they gave us thought as well as instinct. We teach ourselves to be Good, William. Because we want to be better. It's not as easy but maybe, just maybe, if we do it long enough it will be what comes naturally to us."

"So you're saying the *Carrion Lord* is trying to be Good?" he said sceptically.

"I'm saying these are the first villains in a long time who're going with thought instead of instinct," Almorava replied. "It's why they're weaker, too. They're leaning in the wrong direction and it has *cost* them."

"I don't see how that makes anything better," the Lone Swordsman sighed.

"Earlier, you spoke of a root cause. People being people, was it? Except people are learning, William. Even the other side's noticed, to the extent that they try to bastardize what we are. They say that the Heavens gave us laws, but that's not really

true is it? What they actually gave us is guidelines, to make a better world. *And it's working.*"

The Wandering Bard rose to her feet. Almorava wasn't pretty, though in some light she could be called striking. The dark skin, curly hair and strong nose made her face interesting to look at but not so attractive to be intimidating. Normally she had her lute, but tonight it was nowhere in sight. She always wore the same clothes of silk and leather, but this time they were freshly cleaned. *And for once she doesn't smell like a brewery*, William added a little less kindly.

"Day by day," she said. "Year by year, century by century – we're making Creation a better place. Even the bottom of the barrel is pulled up when you hoist the whole thing."

"It's a pretty thought," the hero said. "Doesn't help all of us who live in Creation now instead of in a hundred years, though."

"I know," she said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "But I don't want you to put that sword into that stone thinking it's for nothing. We're part of something larger than us, William of Greenbury. Something that uses us *sorely*. But..."

"Good doesn't have to be nice," he quietly echoed her words from earlier. "Just righteous."

He'd shivered, when she'd said his full name. He'd never told it to her, and no one had called him by that in years. What felt like a lifetime ago. Almorava stayed close to him and for a moment he thought she was going to kiss him. She'd certainly not been subtle about being attracted to him, or to quite a few other people. If she did, he would turn away. Instead she lay her head on his chest and looped her arms around him, sighing quietly. After a moment he hugged her back.

"Every time," she whispered. "You poor Contrition fools break my heart every time."

She drew away, hand lingering on his chest, and left without another word. Silently, William of Greenbury stepped to the altar. He unsheathed the Penitent's Blade and slid it inside smoothly, the sword entering without resistance or leaving a mark. He knelt before the stone and closed his eyes. Behind all that Almorava had said about thought and instinct, he found a deeper truth. It Evil was truly inherent, as she seemed to believe, then to be Good was to make a choice. The thought moved him more than he thought it would.

"It is, we are told, the only choice that really matters," he murmured.

The last line of the first page from the Book of All Things. He was making his choice, tonight. For seven hours he would pray, and then return to Liesse.

Forty-nine hours later, a Hashmallim would come into Creation the exact moment he died.

Chapter 40: Knock

"The Heavens have a way of favouring the general with the better army."

-Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

At a regular pace, the Fifteenth would have gotten to Liesse in twelve hours.

We managed it in two bells instead, eight hours, by letting the slower supply train slip behind. Juniper would never have taken the risk if the rebels had shown a willingness to sally before, but they hadn't. They'd remained behind the walls of Liesse and now we knew why. They'd waited until we were close enough that if we fled out of the angel's range, we wouldn't have time to do anything else. *And then we'd have to deal with over a hundred thousand conscripts for the Heavens.* My senior staff was all in agreement: if an army that size suddenly appeared in the middle of southern Callow, the entire campaign was screwed. The Legions of Terror would have to retreat north to consolidate and bring reinforcements from Praes and western Callow. Which would leave the Wasteland without supervision and the borders with Procer unmanned. If this was just a peasant army we were dealing with the whole affair might be settled before the Principate's forces came back north after dealing with the Dominion, but those people would be Hashmallim-touched. They would not break, retreat or surrender.

The summoning had to be stopped. So here we were, two hours or so before Afternoon Bell, setting up camp a mile away from the walls of the city. There was no point in trying to encircle Liesse so we didn't bother to even make a token effort. There were only forty or so hours left before it all went to shit, we'd have to come in swinging and break through the defences to cut this off at the source. To avoid a panic, the rank and file had not been informed of what exactly was going on inside the city – just that the Lone Swordsman was attempting a ritual that couldn't be allowed to finish. The sense of urgency would hopefully drive my legionaries to push through even when things got bad, because there was no doubt that they would.

The situation we'd been put it was... dire. We were horribly outnumbered, for one. The walls were manned by what Juniper had identified to be the Baroness Dormer's army, a mix of retinue soldiers and southern levies. They were heavy on bows, and they'd

know how to use them: Callowan professional armies like the defunct Royal Guard had been heavier on knights than archers, but farmers weren't above hunting deer and rabbits to put on the dinner table. Smaller and swifter targets than my legionaries, if not as well armoured. The walls themselves could be pounded into rubble given long enough, but time was the thing we lacked most. The one redeeming factor in all this was that Liesse wasn't a castle, it was a fortified city. Beyond the initial wall there was no immediate second circle of fortifications: it was houses and shops, a maze of old streets and avenues. Deeper inside, closer to the lake, there was the Ducal Palace. It had been a fortress once but after centuries of peace its rulers had come to prioritize luxury over defensibility. *Which won't matter, if we can't get into the actual city.*

"Not even a portcullis on that gate. Goddamn Liessen don't know what a real fortress is," Captain Farrier spoke up from my side. "The south has always been too soft."

The Gallowborne followed me everywhere now. Twenty of them dogged my footsteps everywhere I went, no matter the hour. They even guarded my tent.

"Where are you from, John?"

The man blushed. He always did, when I called him by his given name.

"Summerholm, ma'am. Gate of the East."

Where Legions go to die, he didn't say. The old boast rang hollow these days, with legionaries patrolling the streets of the city.

"They'll find a stomach for this fight," I said. "They have a hero with them."

"Lone Swordsman, huh?" the man mused. "Heard about him. Pretty boy, did a speech in Marchford about freeing Callow. Took the First Prince's silver, though. So much for that."

"He's not the brightest man I've met," I said. "But he's a regular monster with a sword. I've seen Calamities fight and he's nearly in the same league."

"Hopefully you won't torch the city to get him, this time," Farrier smirked.

I rolled my eyes. If only that were an option. With the city this densely packed the tactics I could actually use were sharply limited: even the trebuchets would have to be carefully aimed not to hit the streets. Civilian casualties would be horrifying otherwise. *Won't be an issue if Masego comes through*, I thought. Apprentice had gone to take a closer look at the gates, to see if

what we had in mind was feasible. There would spells inlaid in the fortifications, of course. There wasn't a defensive wall in Callow that was without that kind of protection – otherwise any powerful mage could tear through stone, given half a bell to work. Mages in Callow were rarer than in the Wasteland, though, and so the spellwork wasn't refreshed as often. Large Imperial cities got new warding schemes every decade or so, according to my books, but in the Kingdom the wards had remained the same until they were broken. *And Liesse hasn't ever been invaded by the Legions, so it should be as old as it gets.*

Masego would tell me soon. Until then there were other matters to look into. I wasn't forced to wait long until Hakram came back with the man I'd sent for. Neither did I need to turn and look to see they were coming: all the Gallowborne had put their hands on their swords the moment they appeared.

"Lady Squire," the man they called Arzachel greeted me with an insolent smile.

The mercenary was allegedly from Valencis, one of the southernmost principalities in Procer – the one bordering the Titanomanchy and the giants that lived in it. He looked almost like a Taghreb, though his skin wasn't quite as tanned and the cast of his face was unfamiliar. The southernmost Procerans were called Arlesites, I remembered. Famous for their gallantry and tendency to be at war with all their neighbours, both inside and outside the Principate. With his elaborate moustache, forked beard and the wicked falchion at his side he looked like the kind of man who'd sup on babies. He was also still eyeing me with open disrespect.

"It would be proper for you to kneel," I said.

I felt Captain Farrier hide a smile. Callowans had not been fond of Procerans even before they'd failed to lend help during the Conquest.

"I'm not a very proper man, milady," the man shrugged.

I shared a glance with Hakram. Without the need for actual words, the tall orc laid the bone hand that had brought him his nickname and forcefully pushed Arzachel to his knees. The man spluttered and reached for his falchion, but within two heartbeats all twenty of the Gallowborne had unsheathed their swords. Arzachel cast a look at them, then spat.

"Will that be enough?" he sneered.

"You can stay there," I replied flatly.

"You treat all your men this way, Lady Squire?" he said.

I hummed. "Not a single one of them. That's why you're here, actually. You're not one of mine, you're Akua's – and she's about to betray me."

"Doubt it, but even if she was it's got nothing to do with me or my men," he said immediately. "We ain't getting involved in Praesi scheming."

"Then you should have better considered your choice of employer," I replied without a shred of sympathy. "You're here, and you're a liability that cannot be left unattended."

My tone had remained casual, but there must have been something about it that gave him pause. The smugness and self-assurance slid off his face.

"You still need my men," he said cautiously. "You kill me and they won't follow."

"Yes," I agreed softly. "I'm told they're remarkably loyal. They'll listen to you whatever you decide to do. That's why your head in a basket isn't serving as a prop while I talk to one of your lieutenants."

Arzachel went very, very still.

"I've got under forty hours to take Liesse," I said. "I don't have *time* to waste on you, to find a more elegant way to do this. Elegant's never really been my thing, anyway."

"Lady Squire," he said, "I-"

"**Shut up,**" I Spoke. "Akua's clever and she's got some talent on her side, but I've got the single most powerful mage of our generation taking orders from me."

Hakram smoothly unsheathed a knife and crouched at Arzachel's side, forcing up his palm and nicking it. Blood dripped into a glass vial he held up in his other hand before rising to his feet and corking it.

"When he comes back," I continued, "I'm giving Apprentice the vial with your blood in it. He'll be under orders to use the nastiest way he has to kill someone if you so much as twitch in a way that looks treacherous to me."

The Proceran's eyes widened in fear. He was trying to speak but his lips wouldn't move.

"Man's got an affinity with fire," I mused. "Reckon he might boil your blood in your veins."

"Bad way to go," Hakram gravelled, thick fingers slipping the vial under his breastplate. "Not at quick one, either."

"Now," I smiled, "you might be telling yourself 'Heiress is a mage. She'll put up something to protect me from that.' Here's thing thing, though: sure, if you talk to her she might put up a ward. She's skilled. What she *isn't* is an endless power sink – if Apprentice swings hard enough at that protection, it'll break. She's got other plans, Arzachel. How much do you really think she's willing to invest in saving your skin instead of her own objectives?"

Adjutant hoisted the Proceran to his feet, patting his shoulder amicably.

"Off we go, mercenary," he said.

Arzachel turned to leave but I raised my voice again, stopping him in his tracks.

"Oh, and one last thing."

I allowed my Name to flare up, the beast howling in laughter as I felt my shadow stir behind me. I had a feeling that if I looked it wouldn't my own silhouette outlined on the ground.

"Your men are auxiliaries in the Legions of Terror," I said. "Regulations apply to them now. If any of them loot or rape when we get into the city, it's the gallows for them and the officer who failed to keep them in line. *Dismissed.*"

—

"Blasting those gates would be pointless," Masego said, wasting no time on small talk.

Juniper grunted in displeasure, glancing in my direction.

"Thought you said the wards in Liesse would be dusty relics," the Hellhound said.

"They are," Apprentice intervened. "I'm fairly sure that scheme predates Triumphant."

Hakram and Pickler pressed knuckles to their foreheads, murmuring *may she never return*. Juniper didn't bother with the formula, absent-mindedly moving her hand in the gesture. Masego drummed his fingers against his side irritably. He wasn't any more inclined to superstition than I was, maybe even less.

"It's simple in nature, but it's lasted this long because it was cleverly designed. The runes inlaid on the iron take magic and move it into the walls it's linked to. Those have been designed with some standard dispersal spellwork – anything trying to blast that door would have to be strong enough to bring down the entire set of walls at once."

There were rituals that might be able to do that, I knew. Praesi had been horrifyingly skilled with rituals even before they'd been occupied by the Miezens, the unchallenged masters of that branch of sorcery. They usually required mass sacrifices, though, and I had neither the people nor the willingness to bleed them. Pickler spoke up.

"The trebuchets are positioned," she said. "Give me the word and we start hammering away."

"We won't need that," Apprentice said. "Simple in nature, remember? The scheme doesn't deal with the physical aspects of manifested sorcery."

I raised an eyebrow. "And for those of us not too clear on what that meant?"

"If I send fire at it, the flames won't damage the gate. The flames themselves are magical energy, turned into a physical manifestation. But it'll still be affected by the heat emanating from the flames, since the heat itself isn't sorcerous in nature."

Kilian had tried to explain something similar to me once. She'd said that sorcery was, in a way, using your will to lie to Creation. You convinced it that your magic was actually fire or ice or light or a curse, and that it should react accordingly. The bigger or more complex the lie, the more willpower it took. I had a feeling this was all an extreme oversimplification, but it was enough for me to get the gist of what Apprentice was saying.

"Melting the gate would require hours of constant, very high temperature fire," Pickler pointed out.

"So we don't use fire," I said. "Masego, you used a trick in Summerholm. Can you do it again?"

He blinked, then frowned. After a moment his eyes lit up.

"Clever," he praised. "Yes. Though we'll need an impact afterwards."

"You'll get to use your trebuchets after all, Senior Sapper," I said, and the goblin grinned.

For a moment she looked just like Robber about to slip a lit brightstick in someone's pants. I nearly shuddered. *Goblins*. That this one preferred siege weapons to slitting throats in the night didn't make her any less dangerous.

"It's after the way is open that worries me," Adjutant spoke up, grounding me back in the present. "There's heroes in the city,

they'll have set up surprises. And there's no trace of the Stygian spears on the walls."

"They know we need the gate to invest the city in time," Juniper said. "They'll be waiting on the other side, in full phalanx. If there's a competent commander on the other side, there'll be archers on the streets and rooftops behind them."

It would be like walking into a meat grinder. The ring of spears would remain an unmoving rampart skewering anyone coming at it, and with a constant stream of arrows falling on my legionaries they'd be unable to form up in enough of a mass to just push their way through. We'd expected to have to face the Stygians, though, and over the last few fortnights the Hellhound had developed her own tactics to deal with them.

"Sappers and heavies," Juniper continued. "Crack open the formation with sharpeners, then keep them split. We'll use the Procerans to soften them up first, thin the numbers."

"We have my little surprise, if it comes to that," I said.

"You'll need that to deal with the brat," the Hellhound replied. "Keep as many trump cards in reserve as you can. Getting the latter parts of this battle done without you would be troublesome."

"How sentimental of you, Juniper," I said, but I also nodded to concede the point.

William was due a victory, but victory was a very broad concept. My being defeated in single combat might discharge that obligation and then leave him vulnerable to an ally picking him off – after the pattern of three was over, our lives were no longer bound to each other's hands. The trick would be surviving the defeat. I'd had a lot of time to chew over the idea, to think up contingencies. I imagined most of them would fail, which was why I had a *lot*.

"Speaking of brats," I said. "Heiress. The counters are ready?"

"Kilian has her orders," Juniper gravelled.

"I had a look at our Proceran friend earlier," Masego said amusedly. "He's bare of protection, and I believe the slight warming of his blood for a moment was enough of a warning to ensure good behaviour."

"He was shaking when he left," Hakram said. "There was kind of a... pressure, when Catherine dismissed him. Even I felt it, and I wasn't the target."

I hid my surprise. I'd been on the other side of that trick once, the night I'd met Black. I'd seen him use it several times since, inflicting raw terror on people just by focusing his Name in their direction. Had I reproduced it accidentally? I'd need to look into that later. It was too useful an ability not to try and add it to my arsenal. *Finding volunteers for testing might be a little hard though*, I grimaced. Shaking away the thought, I met the eyes of my officers.

"We're as ready as we'll ever be. Another half bell for the legionaries to rest, and then we get this stone rolling."

—

Afternoon Bell was ringing inside Liesse but no one paid the sound much attention.

My horse moved according to my will, trotting slightly ahead of the assembled lines of the Fifteenth. I'd considered making a speech before we struck the first blow, but what would be the point of it? My legionaries knew what needed to be done. They knew why, and they knew who we'd face doing it. Anything else was just posturing. Hakram was on foot at my side, the two of us surrounded by the full contingent of the Gallowborne. Masego was idling somewhere behind us, talking in low tones with his task force of mages as we waited for our last guest to arrive. She made us wait as long as she dared. Heiress arrived with her usual panache with her minion Barika in tow.

Akua was wearing ridiculously gorgeous armour, as was apparently her habit. This one was lamellar steel, with whispers of gold standing out from the red aketon underneath. It split on her upper thigh, revealing beautiful greaves set over high supple leather boots. Even her horse was covered in armour that was prettier than my own very plain – and somewhat scarred, because people kept *shooting* me – plate. Her horse was also alive, unlike Zombie. Whether that was a victory for me or not I still wasn't sure. Refusing to stare at the sight of her, I fished out my dragonbone pipe out of one of my saddlebags and filled it with an herb satchel, striking a pinewood match on my own saddle to light it. I puffed out a mouthful of white smoke, eyeing her unkindly.

"You realize this is a military campaign, not a court session," I said.

"It is the burden of nobility to be superior in all things," she replied gravely. "Not that I would expect you to understand this, given your... origins."

"Pretty armour," Hakram spoke up mildly. "Crossbow will punch right through it, of course. There's a reason we use mail and plate nowadays."

Heiress graced him with a disdainful glance, but did not bother to reply. I breathed in the smoke then blew it out in her general direction. She wasn't close enough to feel it, but the general pettiness of the gesture was still kind of satisfying.

"I assume you summoned me for something resembling a reason?" Akua said.

"A generous assumption," Barika added in her wake.

"Barika Unonti, isn't it?" I smiled. "How's the finger?"

She looked like she wanted to show me one finger in particular but she controlled herself. Smugly, I blew out another mouthful of smoke. It was good to know that my talent for pissing off people hadn't dulled since my days in the Pit.

"Your presence had been requested here so that you can offer technical advice on our offensive, Heiress," Hakram lied blatantly in my name.

We had her here so that if she looked like she was about to double-cross us the goblin munitions buried under her feet could be detonated and a full company of eager Callowans got to stabbing her, should Apprentice fail to explode her head first. That was actually a thing he could do, I'd found out today. Explode people's heads. What a world we lived in. It was a good thing I wasn't a mage, I decided, because I wasn't sure how good I'd be at resisting the temptation to use that spell whenever I had to deal with nobles.

"How flattering of you," Akua said drily. "Not at all a waste of my abilities."

I smiled. "See, you're giving me advice already. Clearly you were born for this."

Before the conversation could devolve any further, Apprentice strolled away from the other mages and broke in.

"Everything's ready," he said.

Heiress smiled in his direction, showing perfect teeth on her perfect godsdamned face.

"Lord Masego, how pleasant to see you," she said. "I've been meaning to say that you and I should share of cup of wine soon. We could learn much from each other."

The dark-skinned mage peered at her over his spectacles.

"Agreed," he said quietly. "I've been meaning to dissect a Named for years, Heiress. Who knows, you might even survive the experience."

Emptying the smouldering remnants of my pipe on the ground, I smothered a grin as the other Soninke's face went blank. Considering Masego had been in the thick of the fighting against the demon, Heiress wasn't going to be making any ground there in the foreseeable future. I cleared my throat, turning to the closest line of Gallowborne.

"Escort Lord Apprentice on the field, please," I ordered. "Shields up. You should be out of arrow range but it pays to be careful."

The twenty men clustered around Masego in a lozenge as they strode ahead of the army, watched silently by the rebels on the walls. They were too far away for me to hear when Apprentice told them to stop, or to hear him when he started incanting. Heiress leaned forward in the saddle, watching carefully.

"He's calling on a contract," she said.

"So he is," I agreed.

"Magic won't break the gate," Akua said. "It is warded to ensure as much."

"See, that's the problem with you traditional Evil types," I said. "You see a gate and it's a personal affront for it to be in your way – so you have to batter it down. You think in straight lines. Even you, Akua. Your whole thing is scheming, but you only ever scheme to remove the obstacles straight in front of you."

The front tip of the lozenge formation scattered as a globe of ice-clear water emerged from Masego's hand. It flew forward steadily. Arrows streaked from the ramparts and the bastion above the gate but it was a small and moving target. It hit the gate without a sound and ice burst from the point of contact, swallowing the whole surface in a heartbeat. I did not spread to the walls, covering only the gate with inhuman precision.

"It is now frozen *and* closed," Heiress said. "Truly, your tactical acumen is without peer. You have a mage who can call on Cocytus at his age and this is the best plan you can craft?"

In the distance, a trebuchet swung. The stone was too high – it hit the crenulations of the bastion above, taking the tip of it clear off and impacting inside the city. I really hoped the rebels had evacuated the outskirts of Liesse. In the distance I heard Pickler scream at the top of her lungs that if the next stone was off by that much the third projectile would be the goblin responsible for it. The second stone was better aimed: it hit the gate, cracking the ice. The metal behind it groaned. As the sappers loaded a third projectile, I smiled at Heiress.

"Gate's warded, yes. The hinges, though? The hinges are just metal. And what happens when metal is exposed to the coldest temperature devils can muster?"

"It gets brittle," Hakram said before she could.

The third stone hit, and with a ripping sound the gate... fell down. The hinges had broken and nothing held it up anymore. I smiled unpleasantly at the aristocrat.

"As you said, my tactical acumen is truly without peer."

The Fifteenth roared its approval behind us as Masego returned to the safety of our lines and the Battle of Liesse began in earnest.

Chapter 41: Retrieve

"... such wanton deviousness had been unseen since the days of Dread Emperor Traitorous, who famously passed for his own Chancellor through cunning use of a wig and a pair of cantaloupes..."

– Extract from "The Most Illustrious Histories of the Inimitable Dread Empire of Praes", volume IV

The clamour died down before long.

The Fifteenth had been positioned according to Juniper's plan for the forcing of the city, with Hune's irregular kabili of over a thousand men taking point. Heavies in the front, with the strength of our sapper corps behind them. Nauk's legionaries were split between the wings, placed so that they would be able to reinforce weak points rather than engage the enemy on their own. I would have preferred for the orc commander to be the tip of the spear but Juniper had brought up the valid point that he was a lot more likely to commit to too deep an offensive than Hune. The ogre would not let her legionaries step even once over the imaginary line set by the Hellhound. I had not cheered with my legion, sobered by the knowledge that this was just an opening blow. With the gates open my own instinct would have been to rush through and take the enemy while they were still unprepared, but Juniper had pushed back against that idea hard. The Lone Swordsman had a history of trickiness that could not be denied, and she didn't want to have to learn what he'd planned the hard way.

"So what do you have for us now, Willy?" I murmured.

Sharpening my vision with my Name, I frowned and peered through the broken gates. Like we'd anticipated the Stygian spears were surrounding the entrance into the city – whether or not there were archers behind I did not have the angle to see, but I'd bet

that there were. Neither the Baroness Dormer nor William himself were noted military commanders, but the older Stygian spear-slaves were said to be schooled in tactics and strategy. It was one of their selling points: the few Free Cities that used the slaves for war did not usually have an officer corps of their own to provide. A few heartbeats passed without any response from the other side, a fact that was almost more troubling than reassuring. Meanwhile, Senior Sapper Pickler's boys got to work. The trebuchets began targeting the ramparts to the sides of the gate bastion, massive stones smashing into them with professional regularity. Our pair of ballistas had been pointed at the bastion itself. There was no expectation that the smaller stones would actually be able to bring it down, and we didn't actually want them to. They just had to clear the fortifications of archers and mages, while the trebuchets made sure there wouldn't be flanking fire on the Fifteenth when it advanced.

I glanced at Heiress, who'd been silent since my last cutting retort. Barika trailed behind her, eyes on my moving legion. They'd be giving me trouble anytime soon now, but whatever they had planned the contingencies I'd set up should hobble them. As long as Akua didn't have the Procerans at her beck and call, all she could put forward was a small retinue of her own guards and her noble minions. Dangerous, but not so much that I couldn't step on them if I wanted to. Getting her right here, where she couldn't get up to any shenanigans away from prying eyes, had been the most important part. I wondered if this was how Black felt all the time, measuring risks and moving enemies over traps you could trigger at any time. It would explain a lot about the man if he did: there was nothing wondrous or adventurous about this. It was just... work. Like bartending, if more dangerous. They didn't talk about these parts in the stories. The sleepless nights you spent anticipating the actions of your enemies, the grind of preparing your counters to their moves. All the while knowing that you might never need the work at all, or that it might turn out you'd made the wrong kind of efforts entirely. *And he did this for all of Callow for over two decades.*

The thought was chased away the moment the rebels finally gave answer to our drawing first blood. A lone silhouette passed through the gates, gait assured and unhurried. For a moment I'd thought it would be the Lone Swordsman, come to defy an entire army on his own, but my Name sight found an entirely different face: Thief. The heroine was strolling with her hands in her pockets, whistling if the shape of her lips was any indication.

"Not the Named I was expecting," Hakram gravelled.

"Preaching to the choir," I said. "Angling for single combat, do you think?"

"She doesn't have a fighting Role," the orc frowned. "I could more or less handle her before I came into my Name: she tries you and she'll end up bleeding on the floor."

There was no flattery in that reply, just a matter-of-fact acknowledgement of how good I'd gotten at killing things.

"Even if she calls for a duel, she'll be getting the princely reply," I said. "We don't have time to waste on posturing."

The Thief agreed, apparently. She stopped sixty feet away from the gate, on the open field but still out of crossbow range. A ballista stone flew over her head, hitting the wall without making a kill but keeping the archers crouched behind the fortifications. She flipped a finger in our general direction then took up a leather pouch from her side, turning it upside down as if to empty the contents on the ground. A heartbeat later, twenty-odd river barges fell in a crash of wood and floodwater. I blinked just to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.

"What the *actual* fuck?" I said eloquently.

I had a few more relevant questions in mind, but that was the one that came out. I glanced at Heiress, whose face was emotionless. Not tell to find there, unfortunately. Had the Thief... summoned boats? This was aspect stuff, there was no doubt about it, but she wasn't a mage. That I knew of, anyway. I gestured for one of the Gallowborne to come closer.

"Tell Apprentice to hurry back here," I ordered. "This was, uh, not part of the plan."

"If this turns into a naval battle, we're down a fleet of our own," Hakram commented drily.

"Less sass, more figuring out what the Hells was the point of that," I ordered.

There hadn't been much water, and it was already seeping into the ground. Still, I somehow doubted making a little mud had been the plan there. There was no sign of the Thief anymore, but I knew it'd be too much to hope for she'd been crushed under the barges.

"They're blocking access to the gate," Hakram said.

I cursed. True, the boats had fallen all over the place: some forward, yes, but some backwards also. The ones in the back probably forbade entrance to the same gate we'd just knocked open. The heroes had replied to our forcing a way in by dropping a mountain of wood in front of that path. I might have picked up on that faster, had I not been befuddled by the absurdity and overkill of the answer.

"They'll be putting the gate back up as we speak," I grimaced.

"We can order Pickler to smash the boats to kindling," Adjutant said.

"That'll take too long," I said. "And I doubt our trick on the gate will work twice."

The orc cast me a cautious look.

"You only have so many cards up your sleeves," he warned me.

"I only have so many hours before the actual bloody Heavens show up," I replied, then turned to another of the Gallowborne. "Run to Juniper. Tell her I'm slapping down my first trump early."

There'd be no need to be any more precise than that, not with the Hellhound. I closed my eyes and reached for my Name, opening pupils on a corpse far to my left. The ox rose to its feet. I'd been meaning this particular surprise for Willy, a way to make swordsmanship irrelevant to our coming fight. I'd had several of our labour oxen slaughtered and stuffed with goblin munition loadouts, including one full of goblinfire. *He'll be expecting them after this.* The ox I'd reached for was one heavy on demolition charges, the flesh carved deep and filled to the brim. It would have been enough to casually level a city block, Robber assured me, so it should be enough for the barges. If not, I had another six oxen to finish the job. I set the undead construct to a steady trot, only then opening my eyes. Hakram was looking at me, trying not to grin. I sighed.

"Out with it," I said. "What did they call this one?"

"The Oxis of Evil," he confessed.

Sappers were, I reflected, the worst of the worst. As if to prove my point the ox I controlled came into my field of view and I noticed there was someone riding on it. A goblin. I couldn't use my Name sight and control the corpse at the same time, but there was no real need to.

"Remind me to demote Tribune Robber," I told Hakram.

"I'll make a note of it," the orc said.

"Lesser footrest," I decided. "That'll be his new rank."

"You don't have another footrest," Adjutant pointed out.

"But if I did," I replied vindictively, "he'd be beneath them."

Heiress, to my surprise, had not taken the occasion to snipe at either myself or the Fifteenth. She was looking at the scene, turning her back to me. Discreetly, I gestured at Captain Farrier

to have another two crossbowmen ready to take her out. I didn't trust how quiet she'd gotten. With Pickler's engines keeping the enemy archers busy, Robber and his mount covered the ground with only a handful of pot-shots taken at them. One arrow hit the ox right in the brains, but the corpse wasn't exactly using those at the moment. A few moments before impact Robber leaned forward and struck a match, setting off a fuse before rolling off. Landing on his feet, the goblin spread out his arms at the soldiers on the rampart and yelled out something. I was too far away to hear, and anyhow I was busy cutting the strands connecting me to the ox before it exploded. The corpse hit the side of the closest barge, horns getting stuck in the wood, and a moment later Creation lit up.

I'd again underestimated how much munitions were amplified by Name power, it seemed. The hand of an angry god swatted aside the centre of the boat pile, smouldering planks of wood catapulted in every direction. One large piece hit the first rank of Hune's heavies, slapping down an orc nearly as large as Nauk like he was a child. I winced. Broken bones for sure, even if he'd caught it on the shield. When the mess settled down I saw that something resembling a path had been cleared. Half a barge was still in the way and would make passing under the bastion much trickier, but it would also be usable as cover. Like I'd suspected, the gate was already back up. Our way to get rid of it had left it largely intact, after all, even if I doubted they'd have repaired the hinges so quickly. I was beginning to think I should have used the oxen on the walls, surprise or not. With the Fifteenth ready to pour in the gap the moment it settled we might have avoided the mess at the gate entirely. *Too late for that now.*

"You were using your sight on Robber?" I asked Hakram.

He was actually better at sharpening his senses than I was, nowadays. He still lacked a second aspect but the few tricks Black had taught me he'd taken to like a fish to water.

"I was," the orc agreed.

"What was he yelling?" I asked with morbid curiosity.

Adjutant smothered another grin.

"I believe it might have been 'knock knock, motherfuckers'," he informed me.

"Lesser lesser footrest," I muttered under my breath.

Behind us, horns sounded and the Fifteenth began to stir itself to movement. The foreplay was over and Robber fled back to the safety of our lines to the loud acclaim of his cohort of insane murderous hooligans. That they were actually *my* cohort of insane murderous hooligans was something I was trying very hard not to

think too much about. In the distance I saw that Apprentice was coming back in my direction, then frowned when he started gesticulating wildly. I gazed in the direction he was pointing at. The Procerans, I saw, were not moving in formation. They were supposed to slip in front of Hune's men to harass the Stygians before impact was made, but they were splitting off my host to the left.

"Heiress," I barked.

There was a chorus of swords being unsheathed and two dozen crossbows instantly covered Akua and Barika. My rival cleared her throat daintily.

"As the Sahelians have unfortunately been put under a strong financial burden by Her Most Dreadful Majesty, I'm sad to inform you we can no longer afford to keep the mercenaries in our pay," she said. "As a result, I no longer command them and therefore no longer qualify as an auxiliary officer according to Legion regulations."

"They're in the Tower's employ," I said.

"They've never signed any contract with the Tower, or been handed gold by it," she smiled.

"Get off your horse," I spoke softly. "Hands on your head, and the same with your minion. You so much as make a vaguely suspicious move and my men will drop you."

Akua did not move.

"On what grounds do you demand this?" she asked curiously.

Apprentice barrelled onto the scene a moment later, panting and looking like he was about to throw up.

"Catherine," he said, his robes now sweat-stained. "*That's not Heiress.*"

Without missing a beat I reached for the knife at my belt, palmed it and threw it. It spun and sunk to the hilt in the leg of whoever was wearing Heiress' face. The illusion shattered with a tinkling sound and the sight of Arzachel, bound and gagged, was presented to my eyes. Barika laughed.

"Too late," the heiress to Unonti said.

The haft of Hakram's axe caught her on the temple a heartbeat later, throwing her down the horse and sending her straight into unconsciousness before she even hit the ground. There was surge of power in the distance, from among the mercenaries.

"The demon," I said. "Masego, are we-"

"It's not getting through," he interrupted.

And like he said, a moment later, there was a responding surge of power from where Kilian's task force of mages was waiting. We'd prepared for this, thank the Gods. Horns sounded again and the left flank of the Fifteenth turned to face the Procerans. They didn't seem interested in giving battle, though. They were fleeing towards the walls. Not that Juniper cared: before twenty heartbeats had passed the legion's ballistas had been repositioned and a pair of bloody furrows was carved in the mercenary ranks. Pickler's sappers had managed to hit the ground at the right angle for the stones to bounce and continue rolling, killing dozens instead of mere handfuls with every shot. Wouldn't have worked as well on better armoured men, but these were light infantry. I glanced at Masego, whose face had turned ashen.

"We have the wrong target," he said. "She's not bringing something through."

Ripping one of the silver trinkets from his hair – this one with a reflective surface – he spoke a few words and an image appeared on the side of it. Zombie moved closer to him and I hunched over. We were looking at the Stygian spears, arrayed behind the gates.

"They're the target?" I asked.

"Not them in specific," he muttered. "This is High Arcana, it works through... associations. Metaphysical concepts."

One of the former slaves in the front ranks staggered, his muscular body turning into a weak husk in the blink of an eye before he dropped dead on the ground. One after another, the Stygian spears dropped. Two thousand, they were. Before thirty heartbeats had passed every single one of them was a corpse.

"Weeping Heavens," I whispered. "What kind of a ritual is this?"

"She fed them, didn't she?" Masego said. "She gave them water and rations. Hers. And she just retrieved that gift."

"If it's retrieved, that means she *got it back*," I hissed.

Two thousand lives in fuel. The power to the east had not dimmed, it had grown. And even as I thought, I could feel it taking shape. The ballistas continued taking their toll but they were irrelevant now. Heiress had never intended for the Procerans to be the force she used today. They'd been a red herring for me to focus my efforts on, thinking I was scoring victories by hobbling them. In front of the fleeing mercenaries a tear in Creation formed, pouring out a geyser flame and sulphur.

"Contact the task force," I ordered Masego immediately. "Shut this down, *now*."

The image on the trinket shifted and Apprentice immediately began talking in a low voice to someone. I didn't stick around to supervise: he knew how to handle that situation better than I did. I passed by Hakram and the Gallowborne securing the unconscious Barika. Someone had gotten Arzachel off the horse and handled the wound, but he wouldn't be talking: his tongue had been removed. *So that's why the Procerans are listening to Heiress.* Odds were someone with Arzachel's face was giving them their orders. When had she made the switch? I doubted she'd managed to put a prisoner on a horse under my nose without my noticing, so she must have found a way to fool Apprentice's spectacles from the beginning. *But then how did he figure out she wasn't the one on the horse when he came back?* Suspicion gnawed at me, but I set aside the matter for now. My eyes turned to the ritual gate, and what I saw there had my limbs going numb. Devils were spewing out of it by the hundreds. Ironhooks, jackalheads and the lizard-tigers. Other kinds I'd never seen before too, with wings.

All of them were going for the walls. The ironhooks would be able to climb them with no trouble. Some would die going up, shot by archers, but eventually a foothold would be made. And then the levies would panic, and the whole infernal host would spill into the city. Thousands would die, I already knew. Tens of thousands, even, since the civilians would be so tightly packed. All of it because I'd thought Heiress would use an old trick again instead of pull out a new one. My Name was silent. It should have been howling in anger and outrage, but there was not so much as a ripple in the pond. The stillness in my mind was all mine. So was the vicious, frozen fury going through my veins. Eventually Kilian's task force managed to shut down the ritual gate by following Masego's instructions, cutting through a giant snake as it did. It didn't matter: another one had passed through unhindered, and it was closing its jaws on the top of the ramparts. Lesser devils were already beginning to use it as a way up.

I got down from my horse and walked to Barika's prone form, crouching to slap her awake. I felt like my body was not my own, like I was puppeting myself the way I did corpses. The Soninke opened her eyes with a pained gasp.

"You breed are ever sore losers," she sneered the moment her eyes swam back in focus.

I felt myself exhale.

"It truly is a game to you, isn't it?" I said. "Even when people die. Just part of the steps."

"You're in over your head, Foundling," Barika said. "You have been since the beginning."

I smiled.

"You know, I've had a lot of time to think about things on the march here. After Marchford, you see, I seriously considered assassinating Heiress even after Black essentially warned me off the idea. Do you know what held me off?"

"Fear," the aristocrat mocked.

"Yes," I agreed softly. "You're right. I was *afraid*, Barika. Not of her but of... escalation. How much worse would she get, if she felt that her life was on the line?"

"Your mistake," the Soninke said, "was to think that you should only be afraid of us when you threaten our lives."

"Right again," I chuckled. "Not in the way you meant it, but there it is. I keep expecting you lot to have lines you won't cross. But you don't, do you? You weren't raised to think that way. Anything goes if it gets you what you want."

"Torture might be preferable to your petty moralizing," Barika said. "Not that you'll get anything out of me. I've been trained to resist the likes of what you can bring to bear."

"You probably have," I acknowledged, and rose to my feet. "Thank you, Barika Unonti, for this valuable lesson."

Calmly, I took the crossbow of the closest Gallowborne and placed a bolt through her eye. She was dead before she even realized what was happening.

"Masego," I said, looking down at the corpse. "Scry Juniper. I'm ordering a full frontal assault."

"And what will we be doing meanwhile, Catherine?" Hakram asked.

I spat to the side.

"We're going to have a conversation with the man who cut off your hand."

Chapter 42: Flaw

"Sometimes you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, executing the hens who laid them on trumped up charges and setting the most rebellious henhouse on fire as an example to the others."

– Dread Empress Maleficent II

Behind me the Fifteenth formed into a battering ram.

Cohorts repositioned smoothly as Juniper's orders were relayed, forming a long broad column with myself and the Gallowborne at the head of it. The Procerans and the devils still suffered the occasional shot from Pickler's engines but the mercenaries had largely been allowed to flee. I'd had a hard conversation on the subject with the Hellhound mere moments ago – she'd been of the opinion that Nauk's kabili should sweep through them so we'd have fewer to fight inside the walls, where my legion would be constrained by the size of the streets. She'd given in, though, when I'd pointed out one important fact: Heiress was after something inside the walls. She would not have burned so many bridges otherwise, resigned a commission handed to her by the Black Knight himself and summoned an godsdamned actual host of devils. This was no longer a siege, it was a race – and I'd need every soldier inside with me.

Since then, what felt like too long had passed. Barika's execution had cooled my blood somewhat, but the fury had been replaced by restlessness. More than once I'd considered just taking the Gallowborne and going in without the rest of the Fifteenth, but it was just too much of a risk. The kind I couldn't afford, not with heroes on the prowl and Heiress just one fig leaf away from open rebellion against the Tower. Masego was still hunched over his scrying trinket, eyeing the unfolding battle inside the walls.

"I thought we couldn't scry behind the city walls," I said.

"The devils disrupted the wards," Apprentice replied. "I can have a look anywhere short of the Ducal Palace itself. And the lake. That place is swimming in so much holy power I doubt either of us could even eat the fish from it."

"How's it looking for the defenders?" Hakram gravelled.

"Their commander set up concentric rings of defences inside the city," the bespectacled mage said. "The walls are lost, but in their retreat they set on fire all the houses behind them. It appears to be slowing the devils down and the soldiers are gathering on the first ring for another stand."

"The Lone Swordsman?" I asked.

"I found him twice," Masego said. "At the moment he appears to be single-handedly holding an avenue against the devils."

"Keep an eye on him," I ordered. "We'll be headed in his direction as soon as we've established a beachhead."

Apprentice replied with a gesture that was half-agreement half-dismissal of the conversation, eyes still peeled on his instrument. Behind us the horns finally sounded, signalling it was time to begin the advance. Like a great beast coming to wake,

the Fifteenth began to march. I set Zombie to a trot and the Gallowborne followed. From the corner of my eye I saw Hakram gently remind Apprentice that he was supposed to be walking, jolting him out of his thoughts. I couldn't tell exactly where it had begun, though I thought it might have been the middle of the column. One voice started, then hundreds joined in and the avalanche swept over the entire legion. My soldiers were singing.

"He was a prince and a handsome lad

On a pretty white horse, all iron-clad

His lance was silver but his heart gold

A peerless champion, or so we're told

Oh! The Lord of the Silver Spears!"

Most of my legionaries were terrible singers, though with that many voices in chorus it was hard to even tell. I cast a look at Hakram, who was whistling the tune and trying not to grin.

"So he cornered us on a muddy hill

His knights were up and eager to kill

But he said halt! We need not fight!

Only the she-witch will die tonight!

Oh! The Lord of the Silver Spears!"

Well, at least they were moving. The tune had been set to the cadence of a legionary's quick march, because of course it had. We got in range of bowshot from the walls fast enough, but there was no one left to shoot at us. All the defenders had retreated. That showed foresight on the part of the commander on the other side: they'd been given orders in case the walls were breached.

"He rode up to us and rang his horn

Called out the Boss with all his scorn

Then sat there idle, proud as all Hells

Waiting while she bid her farewells

Oh! The Lord of the Silver Spears!"

The river barges were no longer smoking but they were messy terrain to go through. The Gallowborne had to break formation around what had once been a prow, shields up and casting wary looks ahead. Hakram's axe – he'd changed weapons after Marchford, and proved deadlier with this one than he'd ever been with the

last – had been in hand since we'd started moving. Once in a while he nudged Masego in the right direction with it, since the Soninke still refused to look away from his instrument.

"So we shot him, right through the throat
So much for that armour and all the gloat
So learn the lesson from that sad day –
Fuck with the Fifteenth and you'll pay
Oh! Poor Lord of the Silver Spears!"

I snorted. Well, that was one lesson to derive from Three Hills. If singing what was essentially trash-talk as they marched kept my legion's morale up, I wasn't going to mess with the formula. The Gallowborne formed a wedge as we approached the gates, slowing down. Said gates had been propped up where they were supposed to stand, but even from my saddle I could see there was nothing holding them there but their weight.

"Adjutant," I said.

The tall orc laughed and moved forward, my personal guard splitting around him. Holstering his axe in the loop of leather he used to hold it, Hakram brought up his tower shield and hunched his shoulders. I felt his Name flare up and squinted in his direction. To my senses his Name felt like something steady and large, almost like stone. It was strange that I could get even that much from him – I never had from Apprentice and Heiress, or even Black. He bullrushed almost faster than I could follow with the naked eye, shield impacting the metal gates with a sound like bell ringing. A heartbeat later the whole thing toppled, falling to the ground in a cloud of dust. Almost instantly arrows fell all round him, a pair sliding off his shield with a metallic clatter. He backpedalled and the Gallowborne formed a ring of shields around him. Through the smoke and dust on the other side, I could see burning buildings and a handful of archers already retreating.

One lingered to try to take a potshot at me, but one of my guards popped out from behind the shields and placed a bolt in his chest. The man fell, likely dead, and that was enough to make the others flee outright. Scouts, I decided. Placed here to tell William when we'd be crossing the gates. Were they still under the impression that Heiress and I were working together? They couldn't be, not after Pickler had turned the ballistas on the mercenaries. It might not matter to them at all, I thought. As far as the heroes were concerned any force but their own managing to hold the city was a disaster.

"Forward," I ordered. "Secure the area."

The Gallowborne sprang into movement as the first legionaries began catching up to us. Hune's regulars, with sappers behind them. Juniper wanted to establish at least basic fortifications around the gates in case we had to defend the chokepoint from the devils. So far it looked like our taking of the entrance wouldn't be contested, but I doubted that would last. The way I saw it, the defenders had two problems at the moment. First, they had to hammer back the devils. Otherwise they'd rampage across the city and kill anyone they could get their hands on. Second, they couldn't allow the Fifteenth to dig in past the gates. If we did there was no getting us out: urban warfare was not a specialty of the Legions of Terror, but we had the professional soldiers and the munitions to force our way in one city block at a time. The moment Juniper had a solid beachhead it was all downhill for them. Zombie took me past my personal guard and into the plaza behind the gates, leaving them scrambling to catch up.

From the corner of my eye I saw movement around a rooftop and instantly brought up my shield. It was a devil. One of the winged creatures I'd glimpsed earlier, looking like a hairy dwarf gargoyle with claws and bat wings. The devil sat there on top of a burning roof, apparently not inconvenienced by the smoke and flames.

"Devil," I called out. "Get ready for a wave."

Captain Farrier bellowed orders and the Gallowborne tightened formation. I remained on my horse, calmly studying the devil as Hakram strode to my side.

"It's not attacking," I said.

The tall orc made a thoughtful sound. "Waiting for reinforcements?"

"Heiress will be trying to push deeper into the city, not hit as we enter," I said. "Otherwise she'll overextend right in front of the Lone Swordsman."

Something that was not likely to end well for her. If Masego was to be believed, the hero was turning any street he was in into a one-man meat grinder. If he ever ran out of devils to kill, he'd be going on the offensive for sure.

"She could be looking through its eyes," Hakram suggested.

More likely. No need to allow that to continue any longer.

"Farrier," I yelled. "Crossbows on the devil."

Before fifteen heartbeats had passed the creature was trying and failing to duck under shots, shrieking as its leg was nailed to the thatch. *It's not fighting back at all*, I frowned. Masego

arrived at my side, finally bothering to look up from his scrying. I leaned to the side in my saddle.

"Can you capture it?" I asked.

He raised an eyebrow and flicked his wrist upwards, muttering a few words. Panes of blue light formed a pyramid around the devil, neatly imprisoning it. Another flick of the wrist and the pyramid was ripped off the roof, skidding against the ground as it was pulled in our direction. Half a dozen crossbows were trained on the imprisoned creature before it had even finished moving. Getting down from my horse, I ignored the protests of my guards and walked to the devil. I knelt in front of it.

"Apprentice," I said. "Open the panel in front of me."

Immediately everyone but Masego began protesting, but I gestured for them to shut the Hells up.

"It's not going to fight me," I said.

The panel flickered out of existence and I leaned forward, pointing a finger at the devil. It shrunk back, screaming in dismay.

"It *can't* fight me," I said.

Apprentice knelt at my side, speaking in the arcane tongue. He clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Only nine layers of binding," he said. "Sloppy work, even by mass-summoning standards."

Nine lines of runes made of light formed in the air in front of him. The dark-skinned mage ran a finger down them, stopping at the eighth line.

"They can't attack anyone part of the Legions," he said, sounding surprised. "If they touch a legionary they have to just... stop moving."

I closed my eyes, letting out a breathless laugh.

"Of course they can't," I said. "The angle Heiress will work after this is that she was trying to make sure the angel wouldn't have anyone to convert, in case I failed. She was just covering all the bases like a good Imperial citizen."

Hakram let out a sharp breath. I hadn't even realized he was standing behind me.

"If she wants to pretend that, her devils can't kill legionaries," he said. "Otherwise she was getting in the way of a Tower-sanctioned military operation."

"Well now," I murmured. "Doesn't that just *change* things?"

I grinned, slow and mean and showing too much teeth for it to be friendly. It looked like I wasn't the one getting hampered by politics, for once.

"Hakram," I said, rising to my feet. "Send a runner to Commander Hune. The moment we have enough troops in the city I want her forces to swing east in force and flank the devils. They are to slaughter any hellspawn they see and engage the defenders only if attacked."

Adjutant saluted and immediately got to it. I offered a hand to Apprentice, hoisting him up.

"You still have a general idea where the Lone Swordsman is?" I asked.

"He moved further east," Masego replied, "but I can find him. Is that where we're headed?"

"As soon as Hakram is back we're moving out," I said.

"You take me to such interesting places, Catherine," Apprentice spoke drily. "What's next, a church full of demons that is also on fire?"

I shrugged. "Day's still young."

—

We hugged the wall on our path east, as much to run into devils as to avoid running into rebels. A single company of regulars and we still must have killed twenty of the creatures on our way through: the Gallowborne realized early that if you ran in their direction they just backed away without fighting, making them really easy to corner. Jackalheads and ironhooks, mostly, but one of the lieutenants was a deft hand with a crossbow and brought down a couple of the already-nicknamed monkeybats. Time was hard to estimate in a city on fire, which was unfortunate given how often I seemed to run into those. Twice we ran into small crews of scouts, but they retreated without fighting. Couldn't really blame them: not a lot of people would want to scrap with a company of hardened veterans led by three Named. The further east we got, the thicker the crowd of devils became. They started fleeing at the sight of us, which was irritating but could be worked to our advantage. If we cleared wherever we stepped just by being there, we could take the pressure off the defenders.

It would be a fine line to walk. I didn't want William and his troops to get off too easy or they'd give the Fifteenth trouble later, but if they collapsed now we were all in trouble. I'd had an idea, when I'd realized how Heiress' devils were bound, that

might neuter them savagely. I needed to be in the right place for it to work, though, and that place was the thick of the fight. Where all the enemy soldiers were. That was not, I reflected, ideal. On the other hand, if I didn't start improvising now this whole battle was fucked. Even worse, there was no telling where Heiress currently was: Apprentice could find no trace of her when he scried, and I still had no godsdamned idea what she was actually after. I couldn't help but think that the devils were another distraction, something for me to get stuck in while she had free hand to accomplish... whatever it was she'd set out to accomplish. *But I can't take care of that until I'm done with William.*

If the Lone Swordsman burst onto the scene while I was dealing with Heiress, I was pretty much dead. All the contingencies I had for him involved a degree of controlled conditions, which was half the reason Masego would not be leaving my side for the rest of this battle. The best outcome I could hope for with the heroes was a truce until the devils were out of play, but that seemed... unlikely. Not opening an additional front on each other might be more feasible, but if Heiress was already past their lines I'd have to pursue – and somehow I doubted they'd just clap me on the back and let me through. That could get messy. Weeping Heavens, my life was a series of progressively worse messes. I'd been kind of hoping the worseness would eventually reach a plateau of awful and stop, but so far that height was nowhere in sight. *Anyhow, I need to survive today to witness that shining ray of hope,* I thought darkly. I slowed Zombie's gait with a twist of will, the Gallowborne following suit around me. I'd had an itch between my shoulders blades for a while now, one I'd first believed to be the result of sweat and rough clothes. But it wasn't going away.

"Hold your fire," I told my guards. "Thief, come the Hells out. Let's have a chat."

There was a long moment of silence afterwards and I almost began to think I'd read too much into this. I hadn't, though: the short-haired woman strolled out of a nearby alley, hands casually in her pockets. No weapons in sight, but considering she'd thrown two dozen boats at the field earlier that meant less than nothing. She was smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"I love talking," Thief said. "It allows me to ask all sorts of questions, like 'why the fuck did you summon a bunch of devils, you unholy twit?'"

"Wasn't me," I said. "We're clearing them out wherever we can."

"If they're not on your side," Thief said, narrowing her eyes, "why aren't they attacking you?"

"It's complicated," I replied, "Long story short, Heiress is running a scheme."

"Well that makes it all better then," the heroine said with an unpleasant smile. "Does that mean we're friends now? Wanna hold hands, maybe braid my hair?"

"Heiress wouldn't have had the excuse to pull something like this if you assholes weren't summoning a brainwashing angel," I retorted sharply.

There were limits to how civil I was willing to be with these people, and the kind of incivility I was willing to take from them.

"Desperate times," Thief said, face turning blank. "What do you want, Foundling?"

"I want to talk with William."

"Not sure he'll be all that interested in talking," the heroine said.

"That'll be my problem to deal with," I replied.

Thief mulled over that for a moment, then shrugged.

"No skin off my back if he puts you down, I suppose. Follow me," she said. "Last I heard he was on the hunt for your little friend."

I frowned. "Heiress?"

"That's the one," Thief agreed. "They should be playing the 'who's losing an arm' game by now."

The heroine leaned forward.

"Here's a hint: the answer is usually '*not him*'."

Chapter 43: Truce

"The best defence is to have killed all your enemies."

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Thorough

Even with Thief guiding the way, we ran into problems.

Apparently her place in the hierarchy of the city wasn't as well-established as William's: twice knots of rebel soldiers tried to refuse passage. The first instance of it wouldn't have been much trouble if it came to blades – we outnumbered them, and the carts they'd upended as a makeshift barrier would fold like parchment in front of any Named – but the second was... tense. Five hundred household troops in Dormer livery, who didn't even bother to hail us before they started shooting arrows. One of my Gallowborne was wounded and I was *that* close to forcefully clearing them out, but

Thief jumped in between us and screamed sense into them. It took too long for my tastes to get through. *The more we waste time here, the more of a head start Heiress gets on her objective.* I got glares and muttered accusations of being a traitor as we passed the enemy soldiers, though this time I wasn't the only one. The Gallowborne got their share of hisses accusing them of being collaborators, being obviously Callowan themselves. My personal guard seemed to take the accusations in stride, for now anyway. I knew from personal experience how much those whispers could sting.

Mostly because they had a morsel of truth to them.

I'd had my doubts William would manage to corner Heiress – she was a slippery one – but they were put to rest before we ever laid eyes on them. In the distance I saw a stream of black flame rise from an avenue, clipping the edge of a rooftop. The fire spread in the blink of an eye until it covered the entire rooftop and then snuffed itself out, leaving nothing behind. I honestly wasn't sure whether I was hoping the Lone Swordsman had been hit by that or not. I believed Heiress would be easier to kill, if it came to a fight, but I doubted anything good would come out of her getting her hands on a hero's corpse. I frowned as my men picked up the pace. Not that she could actually kill William, anyway. As long as he and I were still bound by our pattern of three, we could only die at each other's hands. More or less. I'd gotten a reminder in Marchford that demons were not things of Creation and cared little for its rules. Thief left us as we turned a corner, bounding up to the rooftops with catlike grace. So much for her playing the intercessor.

"Shields up," I called out.

The Gallorborne interlocked into a wall of steel in front of me, allowing me to focus on the scene ahead. None of Heiress' little friends were with her, it appeared. Her only attendants were two dozen Procerans, currently panicking as they spectacularly failed to keep the Lone Swordsman contained. William was wearing his usual horribly pretentious longcoat over mail, boots skidding across the stone as he danced among the mercenaries and took them apart methodically. No helmet, his dark hair ran free as he smiled thinly. My eyes narrowed as I realized his abomination of a sword was nowhere in sight: he used a Callowan longsword, well-made but not angelic in the slightest. Things were already looking up. Parrying was a valid tactic again, it seemed. Heiress pointed a finger in the hero's direction and seven dots of green light formed in front of it, each of them turning into an arrow point that immediately shot off towards the hero.

The arrows remained linked to the dot they'd formed from, the spell lights homing on William as he ducked and weaved around them. Heiress barked a word in the arcane tongue and the

ligaments of light, scattered all around the hero, tightened in an attempt to bind him. Before they could touch him a flash of light emanated from the Lone Swordsman, dissipating the spell as he reached behind him and effortlessly plucked the javelin one of the Procerans had thrown at his back. Spinning on himself, he sent it back at the mercenary: the point took the man in the throat, killing him instantly. I'd give William this: he was an ornery little shit, but he could *fight*. Hunter had been a priceless asset the only time we'd been on the same side, and the deceased hero had been nowhere close to the Swordsman' league.

"Willycakes," Thief called out from a rooftop to my right. "I brought 'friends'."

The hero cast a glance in our direction. I took Zombie around the decapitated corpse of another horse, Akua's if I was not mistaken. *Explains why she's on foot now.*

"Foundling," he spat. "Never far, when Callow bleeds."

"Willycakes," I greeted him drily. "And Akua too! Having a rough day, Heiress?"

"Just taking a walk, Catherine," Akua said languidly. "Stepping on vermin, now and then. They do seem to be everywhere, in this city."

The Soninke aristocrat had discreetly slipped one hand behind her back. Casting as we talked, I was sure. *And we'll be having none of that, thank you very much.*

"Apprentice," I said. "Be a dear and shut that down, would you?"

The bespectacled mage chuckled. "*Now* you talk sweet to me. Typical."

Pushing up his sleeves, Masego cracked his fingers and grinned maliciously.

"If you would grant me this dance, Lady Akua? Here, I'll *lead*."

The dark-skinned man's clothes shuddered, as if caressed by a breeze, and he pushed his open palms forward. The Procerans surrounding Heiress were scattered like toys by an invisible force, while the Soninke herself hastily brought her hidden hand forward and traced a single sigil in the air. A bubble of nearly-transparent magic formed around her, turning opaque under the force of Masego's own spell trying to hammer it down. I left them to it, for the moment, and turned to William.

"I can cripple the devils all over the city," I told him.

"But," he sneered.

"You'll need to reach into the deepest parts of your will and manage... not to contradict me instantly," I said.

"I make no such promises," the Lone Swordsman said.

"I'm trying to save your godsdamned hides here, *Willy*," I snarled. "For once in your life, do the smart thing instead of polishing your principle codpiece."

"William," Thief broke in. "Some of the barricades are already buckling. Whatever she'll do can't be worse than children getting killed in their cribs."

The Lone Swordsman met my eyes, green to brown. If he was expecting me to be intimidated by it, he was barking up the wrong tree. I'd stared down more intimidating things than the likes of William. The sound of fire and screams drifted in from the distance.

"Fine," he said, looking away.

"Apprentice," I said.

The overweight mage casually tossed me one of the trinkets from his dreadlocks, eyes never leaving Heiress. Their little scuffled had changed in nature while I negotiated with the idiot: Masego's force and Heiress' shield were now a shifting landscape of differing pressures, some parts buckling in and others jutting out. He'd yet to manage to power through. I snatched the silvery pyramid out of the air and brought it close to my mouth. I cleared my throat, and the sound of it resonated broadly: like Apprentice said, once it was activated any sound touching the trinket was massively amplified.

"Under my authority as the Squire, I declare the city of Liesse under martial law," I announced, my words drowning out everything else for a moment. "As of this moment, every human inside the city walls has been conscripted into the Fifteenth Legion."

The silver trinket darkened the moment I finished speaking, losing its shine and even cracking in some places. I dropped it into a saddlebag, reluctant to disturb Apprentice from his contest of will by tossing it back.

"As long as the acting commander of the forces inside the city doesn't do something stupid like, you know, openly contradicting me," I said, "the devils can't touch anyone anymore."

"So now, that we've all joined the Legions I have to ask the most important question: how's the pay?" Thief asked.

Hakram shrugged. "For the enlisted? Not bad. Silver though, not gold."

"Adjutant," I sighed. "Stop humouring the heroes."

William absent-mindedly walked over to one of the Procerans who was trying to get up, opening his throat with a flick of the wrist. The others scrabbled away in panic.

"And this protection holds even if you're dead, I take it?" the hero asked.

I unsheathed my sword.

"I'm not sure I like the direction this conversation is heading," I said mildly.

There was a pop ahead as Heiress' shield finally gave way. She swept her arms gracefully in a circle and with a triumphant smile redirected whatever spell Masego had been using in our direction. Apprentice frowned and tapped the ground with his foot: the invisible force exploded halfway to our group in storm of invisible power, ripping out pavement stones and tossing them around. I ducked under one, pressing against my mount.

"Two hundred paces," Heiress said. **"Eight binding, lifted. Attack."**

Three heartbeats later, a jackalhead leapt down from a rooftop and landed in front of the recovering Procerans. It leered hungrily at us.

"William, remember that time we had a truce until everyone else was dead?"

And then you pretty much split my belly in two and left me dying on the ground, I refrained from adding.

"Granted," the hero said. "And not a moment longer."

I'd heard that one before, and though he'd observed the truce to the letter the red scar across my chest was a reminder of how short a truce like that could be. I slid down from my horse, sword still in hand.

"Captain Farrier," I called out. "Hold the back of the street. Don't interfere otherwise – this one's above your pay grade."

"Good hunting, ma'am," the captain replied, already getting his men in position.

Hakram rested his axe on his shoulder, baring his fangs.

"Priority target?" he asked.

"Heiress," I said. "Masego –"

"Battlefield control, like we practiced," he interrupted easily.

I felt my Name pulsing under my skin, eager to sink its teeth into my enemies. Well, it wouldn't go hungry tonight. Already I could see devils swarming in our direction from the east, jumping over rooftops and gathering in the sky. What Heiress had done must have served as a beacon for them, because every single one I saw was coming for us. Joy. For the first time it occurred to me I wasn't sure what would happen to the bindings on the hellspawn if Heiress died. Would they just all be unmade? That would be... bad. They'd rampage across the city. On the other hand, I couldn't afford to spare someone like Akua. She was likely to escape if I took her prisoner, and as long as she held a modicum of control over the devils she had the largest stick to swing out of the three Named currently fighting for control over Liesse. Not an acceptable situation, so I supposed I'd have to burn that bridge when I got to it. I wasted no more time over the thought: the longer I dallied, the more devils would be on us.

With my left hand I unsheathed the knife at my hip and strode forward, Hakram covering that same flank. Unlike Adjutant, I had no shield. Since my leg had been crippled by the demon I'd been forced to admit that this kind of fighting no longer worked for me: I couldn't afford to take hits from behind a shield anymore. My footing wasn't as solid as it used to be. Instead I had to focus on footwork and attack, timing my movements precisely and going for killing blows. One of these days I'd seen about getting a bow or a crossbow to use to widen my range of options, but for now I'd make do with belt of throwing knives strapped across my plate chest piece. And also the handful of... other surprises I carried in the satchel attached to the side of my belt. My first real opponent of the day was an ironhook who jumped straight off the roof to sink its claws into my throat: I ducked under it, letting it land behind me and turning to sink the point of my sword into the back of its neck.

I was already moving again before the corpse dropped to the ground. Already there were a dozen devils standing between Heiress and us, but when she'd made her decision she clearly hadn't factored in heroes. The Lone Swordsman was on the offensive, and I saw that Masego hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said the man could single-handedly hold a street off: the hero moved forward at a walking pace, and everywhere he went devils *died*. There were no bursts of light, no displays of Heavenly wrath or even Name-enhanced strength as he fought. William simply waited for their attacks, avoided them by a hair's breadth and sent heads rolling with a single measured swing. I'd studied swordsmanship under one of its greatest living practitioners for a year, sparred with a woman who could tear through steel with her bare hands and fought a demon of the Thirteenth Hell on foot with only five people at my side. And yet, in that moment, the sight of the Lone Swordsman calmly

dispatching one opponent after another sent a shiver down my spine. That was what the Mandate of Heaven looked like, I thought. An inexorable march forward against which even the most monstrous of strengths failed.

One of the hairy dwarf gargoyles tried to sweep down on me but its head was instantly pulped without any intervention on my part, the rest of its swarming companions dispersing with cries of fear. Apprentice was keeping the distractions off our back, like he was supposed to. Hakram and I impacted the mass of devils a heartbeat later. My Name flared up and I let myself sink into it, not to shape the power but to use the awareness that came with it. Everything came in flashes: a hand reached for my throat and I spun my wrist, slicing cleanly through it. I glimpsed a scream jackal head before I rammed my knife between its eyes, spinning around the devil as I tore out my blade. An ironhook came for my legs but Adjutant's axe split its head in two before the orc kicked the corpse into the open maw of a lizardtiger. Another monkeybat landed screaming on my back but it instantly began to turn to dust as Apprentice took care of the problem while I opened the throat of another ironhook. A jackalhead bounced off of Hakram's shield and tried to tackle me but my knife flicked up and opened it from crotch to throat. I abandoned the knife in the devil's body and caught a gargoyle by the throat, *squeezing* until its head popped off. I half-stepped away from a lizardtiger's lunge, crouching to take back my knife as Hakram's axehead tore through its neck.

Everything was crisp-clear, like the air on a cold morning, and I felt a sort of savage joy welling up in me. From the corner of my eye I saw Thief wading across the devils on the rooftop behind Heiress, weaving around the grasping creatures like she was running an obstacle course. She leapt towards Akua's back but was intercepted halfway through by a gargoyle. Undeterred, she somehow bunched up together and used the devil as leverage to jump again, landing in a crouch behind Heiress. The aristocrat pointed a palm at her, green runes appearing in a linked circle around her hand: there was a detonation like a sharper exploding and the heroine was blasted through the wall of the house behind her in her shard of wooden splinters. I wasn't worried. Even heroes with Roles unsuited for fighting were remarkably hard to hurt. Another wave of devils came for us by Hakram's side but they didn't manage to get far. Collars of whirling wind formed around their throats, tightening and dragging them back.

I hacked through the shoulder of a jackalhead Adjutant battered down with his shield and allowed the orc to finish it as I pressed ahead. One last ironhook, who managed to weave under a sword stroke only to take a knife in the belly, and finally I was on Heiress. All that stood between the two of us was the last few Procerans – who eyed me with undisguised fear. To my right I saw the Lone Swordsman cleaving through a devil and casually stepping

between the halves of the corpse. I ignored him for now, eyes on Heiress. Who smiled.

"Almost," she said.

There was a flash of blinding light and immediately I back stepped, grabbing a devil by the throat and pulling it between myself and the light as I clenched my eyes shut. I opened them the moment I felt the devil bite into my shoulder, fangs somehow managing to dent the steel plate. Tossing the devil away, I looked in Heiress' direction and cursed. There were nine of her now, all running north.

"Masego," I screamed. "Get her."

If she got away now, we were in trouble. Shit, which one was she? William started running, slicing a devil in two without stopping and headed after the closest Akua. I called on my Name, feeling it respond eagerly to my anger. A bolt of lightning threaded through the crowd, hitting one of the Heiresses in the back – the smoking corpse of a Proceran mercenary fell to the ground. The Lone Swordsman lopped an arm off another one, not even bothering to finish him off. Shadows coalesced into a spear as I tried to pick a target. A jackalhead tried to break my neck but Hakram had caught up and his axe sent the lupine head tumbling to the ground. Not the one in the middle, I thought frantically. Too obvious. To the left? It was away from William. I cursed and chose one of the three on the left, the one getting away the fastest. The spear of shadows flew straight, clipping Heiress in the shoulder.

Another mercenary fell to the ground, half his chest missing.

"Fucking Hells," I cursed again.

The Lone Swordsman relieved another Heiress of her leg, but it was a decoy again. Only five left now. I couldn't follow, damn me. I couldn't run, not like I used to, and the devils were continuing to stream in. Without Apprentice to cover the skies, I was having to fend off the godsdamned gargoyles every time I wasn't putting down some other devil going for my throat. William though, bless his Callowan hide, was hounding the fleeing Heiresses with all the viciousness he could muster. Another decoy died to an explosive ball of red light courtesy of Apprentice, and the last four were clustered together. The Lone Swordsman ran one through, didn't even stop to look whether it'd been the real Heiress – it hadn't – and burned another one alive with a blast of almost blinding light. Only two now, and William was closing in.

That was when the fireball caught him in the face.

The hero was thrown back, rolling on the stone. Ahead of him Fadila Mbafeno, on a horse and holding the reins of another, withdrew her hand. A dozen devils surrounded her like a hellish honour guard. One of the Heiresses deftly slid atop the free mount, claiming the reins and wasting no time in making her getaway. More devils poured in, filling the gap between the Lone Swordsman and my other rival, and I had to admit then and there we would be catching her right now. I hissed in anger, taking out my temper on the closest devil – my sword blade hacked through the chest, the jackalhead screaming in pain before I put it of its misery.

“Retreat,” I called out to Hakram.

We needed to regroup, and then get ready to press forward again. I sure as Hells wasn’t done with this fight.

Chapter 44: Victory

“Does not show traditional heroic talent for forging strong friendships but considered a leader by her peers. Responds aggressively to threats. Displays continued recklessness and an aptitude for thinking on her feet. This agent recommends disposal before she can turn into a legitimate threat to the peace of the realm.”

– Report ‘for the eyes of Lord Black only’, concerning the Imperial ward Catherine Foundling

“GALLOWBORNE, TIGHTEN RANKS!”

My personal guard dragged the wounded behind their shield wall and began retreating in good order under the bellowed instructions of Captain Farrier. They’d held up surprisingly well against the assault of the devils, I saw. Less than a line of casualties. Some of that could be attributed to the fact that they’d fought defensively and not been the focus of the hellspawn to start with, but there was more to it than that. They’d held the line against devils before, at Marchford. They’d been through the crucible already, and all the soldiers who would have flinched in front of the howling horde were already dead. To borrow one of the more brutal sayings of the Queen of Blades, war had separated the wheat from the chaff. I fell back behind the protection of the shield wall, Adjutant swatting down anything that came even remotely close to us. Masego, I saw, had already done the same. My Callowan soldiers gave him as wide a berth as they could: Apprentice had shown enough of what he could do that my rank and file stepped lightly around him.

Getting back to my personal guard had been a matter of running more than fighting. The Gallowborne were now at the back end of the avenue where most of the fight had taken place, backs against a stone guildhouse to limit how many angles they’d have to

defend. I took a look back to where I'd done most of my fighting today and grimaced: it was packed with devils, milling around and beginning to mass for an offensive against my men. No sign of William, though there was no doubt the bastard was still alive. It would take more than devils to do in the Lone Swordsman, even if he didn't have his creepy sword. I bit my lip and considered my options. Heiress had either run off on a horse northwards or tried to fake me out again by continuing on foot to the east. I was inclined to believe she'd been on the horse: she wouldn't be as sanguine disposing of her Praesi minions as her hired ones, and Fadila had followed her on the ride. *Could be how she's selling this, though.* I resisted the urge to spit and set the matter aside. Wasting time to speculate on her tricks was playing right into her hand.

North or west? North of us there was the ritual site the Lone Swordsman was using to bring the angel into Creation, which my gut told me was her target. Whatever she was intending to do to that ritual, it couldn't be allowed to come to pass. She was dangerous enough without having stolen an angel's power or worse, corrupted it. There were precedents for that, though they were legend and not recorded history. Not that the existing Praesi records were all that reliable, considering Tyrants were the ones who decided what got written. Even worse, with Callowan histories largely put to the torch or confiscated after the Conquest there were no other record to cross-examine them with. North, I decided. It would have to be north. Trying to force our way through the devils was a recipe for a rout, even with three Named on our side, so we'd have to swing around. What was it Heiress had said, when she'd fucked us over? Two hundred paces. How much ground would that actually cover? Was it centred around her? It made most sense as a circle, but even if that was the case that didn't tell me whether those two hundred paces were the radius or the diameter. *That's why we bring specialists, Catherine.*

"Masego," I said, jolting the mage out of his thoughts. "What Heiress did, with the devils. How does it work?"

The dark-skinned mage pushed up his glasses.

"I layman's terms, she put down a metaphysical banner where she stood that formed a ward. Inside that ward, the eight binding for devils she's summoned is lifted."

In the distance a crossbow bolt caught a jackalhead in the chest. The devil yelped and retreated, but they were beginning to test our defences. We couldn't linger here much longer.

"What's the shape of the ward?"

"Circle," he immediately replied. "Cast this hastily, it can only be that."

"And the two hundred paces..."

"Diameter," he frowned. "I'm assuming, considering the amount of sorcery she used to create it."

Good news. Five streets to the right should be enough, maybe seven if they were too narrow. We'd lose time going around but that couldn't be helped. I closed my eyes, visualizing what Heiress had done. Wait, Masego had said a *ward*. A fixed point, then, that she wouldn't be able to control after she'd made it unless she was on hand.

"Apprentice," I said slowly. "That ward, can you affect it?"

He blinked. "Given enough time I could break it, if that's what you're asking. Would there be a point to that? They can't misbehave outside its boundaries, and what she did to lift the binding seems to be attracting them."

Yes, I'd noticed that last part. I almost smiled, showing my teeth. Hakram let out a bark of laughter and Masgeo looked confused.

"Apprentice, when she lifted a binding she made a hole right?"

"You want me to lay a binding of my own," the mage immediately understood.

It was always a pleasure to work with clever people.

"Right now every devil in Liesse is drawn to this ward like it's a beacon," I said. "Let them. When they get here, though? Make them *fight*."

—

Modifying the ward was much faster than dismantling it, though not without problems. Heiress had laid traps into its structure, because of course she had. Masego took the precaution of creating a small levitating orb of light that sucked in the torrent of black flames that spewed out the moment he accessed the ward structure. He also had to take apart a set of fake runes he assured me would have rotted my eyes in their sockets if I'd looked at them. Still, before the devils mounted a proper attack he finished the job. What I saw afterwards was a sight I would take to my grave. I'd witnessed great and terrible things, since leaving Laure. Walked the grounds of the Tower and passed through the Hall of Screams. I'd watched a battlefield turn into a hellish wasteland of green flames at Three Hills, fought a fully incarnated demon in the ruins of Marchford. None of those held a candle to seeing a thousand devils rip each other apart gleefully in a massive melee, rending each other's bodies apart with tooth and claw. I felt a shudder go through the Gallowborne as they

watched, awed by the sight of the monsters turning on each other mercilessly. We didn't stick around to see the fight play out, turning west to swing around the ward.

There was no banter, not after the mess we'd just left behind. My soldiers were in a subdued mood, and as I rode Zombie I kept an eye out on our surroundings. Twice I glimpsed goblins on rooftops, nodding back to their salutes before they scampered into the shadows. Robber's cohort had been given a very specific task and it was pleasing to see they were on top of things. This particularly plan I'd hatched with Aisha's help, and though events had conspired to complicate its completion I'd also been handed a golden pretext to use it. By the time we'd begun marching north again we'd gotten deep enough inside the city I was surprised we weren't running into rebel soldiers. They must have retreated past the second ring of defences, though who had actually given that order was anyone's guess. William must have been in overall command by sheer virtue of being a hero, but he wasn't a battlefield commander. My money was on the Baroness Dormer, which wasn't a bad thing for the Fifteenth. As far as I knew she hadn't fought in the Conquest and had no real military experience. She was the kind of opponent Juniper would eat for breakfast.

The narrowness of the street we were in had forced the Gallowborne into a column instead of a stronger formation, which made me uncomfortable. These would not be good fighting grounds if we ran into the enemy. I was considering moving us to a broader avenue when I saw a single silhouette ahead of us, walking calmly towards my men. *Trouble*, I thought, calling a halt.

"There has to be another way," Adjutant said quietly.

"We've discussed this before," Apprentice replied flatly.

We had, and it was too late to back out now. I'd try talking first, but my history with talking sense into people was a little checkered. Still, who knew? There were a lot of ways for the third encounter between a hero and a villain to go. Few of those to my advantage, but sometimes you had to roll the dice even if the game was rigged. William paused four city blocks away from my forces, casually sweeping his sword along the ground. The brute strength and speed of the sweep created swirls of wind in front of him, scattering dust. The message was clear: the Gallowborne were not to advance any further. I dismounted Zombie, idly checking my weapons. My throwing knives were safely secured, and the satchel on the back of my belt held tight. Passing the shield wall, I strode forward to meet the Lone Swordsman on the field. His scrap with the devils had cost him no wounds, I saw. His long coat was torn in several places, but somehow that just

made him look rugged. The chain mail under was still pristine and his dark hair stylishly tousled.

I was drenched in sweat under my plate, my bad leg ached and my hair had knotted against the edge of my open-faced helmet in a way that itched. *Fucking heroes*. He probably smelled like flowers, I thought bitterly, while I smelled like horse and blood and being in over my head for at least the tenth time this year.

"And so we meet again," William said, green eyes cold.

"That's usually what happens when you go looking for people," I spoke drily.

"As Heiress is no within my reach at the moment, I must call our truce at an end," the Lone Swordsman said.

"Who would have seen *that* coming," I spoke in a monotone. "Alas, you've taken me by surprise. Curse your unexpected betrayal."

Apparently the hero hadn't foreseen quite this much mockery when he'd prepared for this conversation in his head, because he did a piss poor job of hiding how irritated he was. Honestly, that was on him. I'd never shown him any respect before, why would I start now?

"Die," he said. "And not nicely."

"Villains have limited retirement options, William," I said gently. "This isn't exactly a revelation to me. What I'm curious about, though, is what happens *after*. Say you manage to kill me. What then?"

"Then your legion loses its leader," he said. "I rally the army of Callow and we drive your butchers out of Liesz."

"I'm not giving out any orders at the moment," I pointed out. "My legate is. And as for you driving the Fifteenth out of this city... Well, the last time it fought a battle against a proper army, it spanked a force twice its size of professional soldiers. Half of which was mounted. You think levies and a bit of southern retinue is going to stand up to veterans like them? William, my soldiers brutalized devils when they were just a bare skeleton of a legion. They're led by a woman so clever she sometimes scares *me*, and we're on the same fucking side."

"Are you quite done boasting?" the Lone Swordsman asked with disdain.

I ground my teeth, pushing down my flaring temper. Gods, it was like talking to a stone wall that was just sentient enough to be an obstinate jackass.

"What I'm telling is that this battle is over," I said. "We're in the city. There's no walls to hide behind and your barricades are just going to give my sappers a good laugh. There's no winning this for you anymore, William. My death makes no real difference. If anything it just makes it easier for Apprentice or Adjutant to kill you afterwards – no more Rule of Three keeping you alive."

"All those pretty sentences covering for one word: surrender," he mocked. "That's always been your answer, hasn't it Catherine? Licking the Tower's boot and hoping your foreign paymasters take pity on us."

"For once in your life," I growled, "try to think beyond your pride. What are you accomplishing here? The rebellion is over, William. The Duke of Liesse is dead. Black dispersed the Countess' army without even giving battle. Procer has its own troubles in the south and it can't afford to open up another front. There are no reinforcements coming for you. *You are alone.*"

"Yes," he smiled strangely. "Alone. It was, I think, always supposed to end like this. It is... fitting."

"This isn't a story, William," I said tiredly. "Thousands of people are going to die. It won't be glorious, it won't be heroic. It'll just be piles of corpses littering the streets getting picked at by the crows. All those lives snuffed out for no good reason."

"You know, I once told Almorava the very same thing," the hero said. "About it not being a story. I was wrong. This is a story, Catherine. It always was. Even this conversation is part of it: my last temptation before the end. I made a choice, Squire, and I stand by it. Some things are worth dying for."

"And the people of Liesse, are you choosing for them too? Because when Contrition comes calling, it won't ask them nicely to enrol. You're robbing them of free will so you can play the leading role in your little tragedy."

"You know little of the Hashmallim," he said. "All they do is show you the truth of what you are. Of what Creation is. They don't force anyone's hand, Catherine. They don't *have* to, once you understand. There is only one path forward."

"All you're doing is letting some creature from another realm into the heads of hundreds of thousands to tinker with their will," I snarled. "Gods save us all from *principled* men. You're really the same as he is, when it comes down to it. You have a point to make and you don't care what it costs to everyone else. Because you want to be right, even if half the continent burns for it. At least villains own what they are."

William laughed.

"And what do *you* stand for, Catherine Foundling?" he challenged. "Over a year we've fought, you and I, and I've yet to see you take a stance. You claim your way is the one that works, but what have you actually accomplished? You don't have morals, Squire. You don't have beliefs. Like a reed, you bend however the wind blows."

"I want peace," I said. "I want order. I want good crops and fair taxes. I want Callow to prosper, and I don't care who rules it as long as it does. If I have to strike deals with monsters to see that done, I will. Kingdoms, empires, they're just lies we all agree on so our lives have a frame. What matters is the people, not the deceit. The Kingdom of Callow is no longer a lie that serves its people, *and so it needs to die.*"

"A kingdom is more than the sum of its people," William said. "It has a higher meaning, a higher purpose. I am a citizen of the Kingdom of Callow, and so I am free. And I will fight so that one day all other Callowans can claim the same."

"I should have killed you, that first night," I said. "I didn't understand what I was unleashing. I thought I did, Gods forgive me, but I could not have been more wrong."

"Too late," the Lone Swordsman said, sword rising. "Let us end this, Squire. This time, there is no Warlock to save you."

I unsheathed my sword calmly.

"If I'm going to beat a truth into you today, William, it's this one: I'm the person people need saving *from.*"

He moved like lightning. The longsword carved through the space where my head had been a heartbeat earlier, but I'd ducked under the swing and rammed my fist into his stomach. It didn't do much – I doubted he'd even bruise – but I wove my Name into a trick and a quick burst of shadowy energy pushed him back. I pressed the advantage, feinting for his arm but turning it into a lunge that would take him through the throat. His blade came up to slap mine away as he twirled gracefully and I smiled. With his old sword, he might have managed to cut through my blade with his own. Now, though? Now we both fought with steel. The fight was a little more even. I moved sideways, circling him slowly, and he moved to match me. I'd meant to continue doing that until the afternoon sun was in his eyes – unlike me he had no helmet to shield his sight – but the bastard knew his way around a sword fight. Right before he would have stepped where I wanted him to, he ran a finger along the length of his sword. There was a flash of blinding light but I was prepared for it: he'd pulled a similar trick in our last duel and I'd been thinking of counters even since.

Sharpening my senses with my Name was one of the first tricks I'd learned, but it had taken me a while to realize I could also do the opposite. For less than a heartbeat, I blinded myself. When my sight came back I caught his wrist as he brought his sword down to cave my head in, my own sword swiping at his lower leg. I drew blood through the thick leather boots and spun away from him, hastily giving grounds. Gods Below, pushing back his swing even for a moment had nearly broken my arm. He was stronger than the last time we'd fought, and I didn't mean that in an abstract sense: he was *physically* stronger. And faster too, I was pretty sure. How he'd managed that without putting on muscles mass I couldn't know, but it felt like Name shenanigans at work. I spat to the side in dismay. My own Name had never been gracious enough to give me anything physical but better reflexes, which apparently all Named got anyway. *Fucking heroes*. I'd deal with it anyway. If I'd learned anything from our last duel it was that I wasn't going to beat him with a sword. Brute force had never been my thing, when it came down to it: trickery and cheating had been my bread and butter since the first time I'd stepped into the Pit.

"You've gotten better," the Swordsman noted.

"Your Name is bullshit and so are you," I said.

I probed his defences with the tip of my sword but he was not so easily baited. I feigned a strike to his side but had to hastily retreat when his blade came within an inch of my throat. He turned the strike into a blow at my shoulder, pushing forward, but I spun around him. For a heartbeat we were back to back and I slipped my free hand inside the satchel at my belt, snatching a sharper. As we pivoted again to face each other I pushed a trickle of power into my hand, energy crackling around my fingers. Savouring the look of surprise on his face, I punched him in the stomach with the clay ball. It detonated loudly, tossing him like a rag doll. It also broke three of my fingers, but that was just the price of doing business. Focusing for a heartbeat, I wove threads of necromancy and snapped the bones back in place as I rushed after him. He tried to get up but my armoured boot slammed into his chest, knocking him back down. I had to step back to avoid a strike that would have slipped in the weak point of my greaves but I took out a throwing knife and flicked it at his sword hand, relying on my Name's reflexes to guide the throw. It nailed him right in the wrist and he hissed in pain.

Apparently I'd hit a nerve – or an artery – because there was a flicker of power before a burst of light emanated from his frame. I deftly stepped out of range, but William took the occasion to get back to his feet. The light had pushed the knife out of his wrist, I saw, and the wound was already closing. *Well, that's new*. Taking him apart piece by piece wasn't an option, then. His

wrist was still bloodied, I noticed, so I supposed bleeding him out was still possible. There was a lot of blood in a human being, though. Odds were I'd run out of throwing knives before he ran out of red to bleed. More than that, I couldn't count on him running out of power anytime soon. He'd flatly outclassed me in that regard even before Masego had carved out a third of my Name. You might say I was out of my depth. Engaged in an uphill battle. It was, most definitely, a *Struggle*. Something dark rose in the back of my mind at the thought, howling in rage at the Heavens as my Name finally woke up. My veins warmed with power and I grinned.

"Let's try that again," I said.

I dashed forward, the pain in my leg gone as the pavement stone gave under the pressure of my charge. I lowered my head under the Swordsman's swing and unsheathed my knife, ripping through his sleeve as I passed him. The chain mail under held, but I felt the rings get carved. Goblin steel had few equals on the continent. He pivoted to hack at my shoulder but I parried the blow with my knife, forcing him to step around the arc of a sword strike that would have cleaved through his neck. Clasp my wrist with his free hand he forced it down, the sheer strength of his grip denting plate armour, but I rammed my knee his stomach. He staggered back, releasing my wrist, and I slammed the pommel of my sword on the crown of his head. He let out a curse and backed away, bleeding where I'd struck. I wasn't about to let him recover: in a matter of moments I was on him again, swinging as my Name laughed in delight. Evidently he didn't use his head much, because the hit hadn't slowed him down: with a deft twirl of his sword he ripped my knife out of my hand, allowing the chain mail on his arm to catch my sword at an angle that made the blow impotent. I stepped back, abandoning the knife, and he tried to make distance so he could take back the flow of the engagement from me. *Screw that*, I thought, and reached for my satchel again. I tossed a brightstick at him and he looked insultingly sceptical until I aimed my hand at it and shot a small burst of shadow and caught the spinning munitions in the air.

The brightstick exploded inches away from his faces with a burst of light and deafening sound. I'd closed my eyes even as I moved forward. It was too much to hope that he'd be permanently blinded and have his eardrums burst the way a normal man would, but a moment was all I needed. Somehow, even blinded, he managed to catch my first strike with his sword. I let him pass, spinning my wrist to turn the attack into an arcing blow that caught his shoulder. I'd reached into my Name as I struck, drawing on its strength, and I felt the mail give. My blade came away red. Once again I felt his power rise but I grit my teeth and reached for my own, striking at his chest with the heaviest spear of shadows I could muster. The rest of his duster was torn blown through, his power scattered and the mail *smoked*. I was winning. Gods, I

was actually winning. He'd fallen to his knees, but his eyes were working now. Snarling, he hacked at my flank. I let the armour take it, half-stepping to blunt the impact. My hand reached for my satchel a third time, taking out a sharper.

His eyes widened and I could see the thought process going through his mind, clear as day. I'd finish moving before he could reposition his sword to stop me. His mouth opened, to say what I did not know. His power flickered a third time but with a snarl of triumph I shoved the sharper into his open mouth. Before the light could fully manifest I'd shot a burst of shadow at the sharper and it *blew*.

The Lone Swordsman's body skidded across the stones, his precious light doing nothing to help him. When the momentum stopped carrying him he did not manage get up, limbs twitching weakly. I could already feel the power I'd gotten from my aspect leaving me more with every heartbeat – I'd been liberal with its use, which had made it end even faster than usual. I knew the moment it was gone I'd be exhausted and my leg would be a very real problem, so I had to end this quickly. *Trap*, I thought as I moved forward. *This feels like a godsdamned trap*. A downed hero who just got the beating of his life, unable to move? This was the part where I made my monologue and he begun his comeback. I couldn't just leave him there, though. He'd already shown he could heal himself to an extent and if he came back from this I was in deep, deep trouble. I'd give it better than half odds I'd be flat out of juice the moment my aspect tapped out. *And if it comes to a contest of skill between us, I'm going to die a very ugly death*. Well, I did have one last surprise in my satchel. Very carefully, I took out my last clay ball. I had to sheathe my sword to strike a pinewood match and light the fuse on the goblinfire. Heart beating fast, I tossed the projectile at the hero.

I knew, before the ball was even halfway there, that I'd made a mistake. The Lone Swordsman's arm rose weakly, brandishing his sword. He rasped out one word.

"Swing."

His wrist flicked and a gale blew as if he'd cleaved the world in half. The goblinfire exploded in the air, spreading in droplets that landed everywhere. That was, I decided, bad. A heartbeat later the last of my aspect-granted power winked out. I wasn't entirely out, but I wouldn't be able to make a spear even if my life depended on it. Which it very well might. That was, I decided, *very bad*.

"Rise," the Lone Swordsman rasped.

Light spread around his body in thick cords, healing his wounds and hoisting him up. He looked in bad shape, but he was definitely moving.

"Very, very bad," I muttered.

Apparently we were past the banter stage because William was on me before the chords of light were even gone. My arm moved sluggishly but I parried the first blow, free hand reaching for another throwing knife. Fingers closed around my wrist.

"No," the Lone Swordsman growled.

"Yes?" I hazarded, the word drowned out by the plate covering my wrist breaking apart completely under his grip.

I slugged him in the face with the pommel of my sword but he took it unflinchingly, pushing me back.

"I'd settle for a maybe," I said.

My cutting sarcasm, unfortunately, failed to draw blood. Weeping Heavens, I was pretty sure he'd sprained my wrist under the steel. That limited my options pretty sharply. He advanced on me again, eyes ringed with a sort of luminous clarity that gave me a headache just to look at. I backpedalled blow after blow, giving ground. I was running out of tricks to turn this around. Slapping away my blade, he hammered down on my only good wrist left with his own pommel – the impact forced me to drop my sword. Well, I still had knives. The hero's blade sliced through the belt keeping those up, though I managed to snatch one before they fell to the ground. I'd *had* knives, I corrected mentally. The Lone Swordsman had unfortunately brought a longsword to a knife fight, which admittedly gave him a bit of an advantage. I stepped around a hew and got in close but he swept my legs. I hit the stone with a dull thud and he stood above me with his sword raised.

"And now," he said solemnly, "*I Triumph.*"

"Do you know what the difference is, between a Squire and a Swordsman?" I croaked out.

He blinked in surprise.

"I have a horse," I announced.

A moment later Zombie hit his back. I closed my eyes and reached for the heart of the necromantic construct, where Robber had cleverly reproduced the same device he'd made for the brooch in Masego's hair. The bits of bone scraped together as I used the very last dregs of my power, producing a single spark. The demolition charges stashed inside my mount blew up instantly and the world turned white, heat licking at my face.

A heartbeat later I opened my eyes, though I didn't remember closing them. I tried to move but my everything was broken and I wasn't laying down where I'd been. *Shit, I blacked out.* My right

arm looked like I'd tried to make a knot out of it, which wasn't promising. My leg was also apparently on fire. Goblinfire. Repressing a horrible scream of pain, I managed to sit up and hastily unclasped the greave with green flames on it, feebly tossing it away. My left hand blindly groped around for support, the wrist pulsing in pain, but instead I found something metallic. My knife, I realized. The one Black had given me what seemed like years ago. My thoughts felt slow and disjointed. I found William laying unconscious a few feet away from me and dragged myself along the ground, knife still clasped in my fingers. The moment I got close enough, I wildly stabbed into his exposed neck. Steel sunk into flesh and I let out a hiss of triumph. The hero's eyes opened and he gurgled out a word.

"Rise."

"Oh, *come on*," I croaked.

The already-closing wound was pushing out my knife. The chords of light weren't as thick as last time, but there were still working. I got my knife out and stabbed him again. Or would have, if he didn't catch my wrist. His other hand came up and I glimpsed his sword, shining like a lake under moonlight. It passed through my plate like it was parchment, plunging straight into my heart. The hero pushed himself up to a crouch.

"And so it ends," he said.

I could feel my Name running through my veins, not to save me but for some... deeper purpose. It was true, then. *We curse our killer with our last breath*, Black had said.

"You will die before the day is done," I rasped.

"And yet," the Lone Swordsman smiled, "I win."

My vision was blackening. I could feel life leaving my body. Serenely, I smiled.

Gotcha, I thought, and died.

Chapter 45: Corpses

"It probably doesn't count as cannibalism if you're already dead."

– Dread Empress Sanguinia I, the Gourmet

Nefarious's corpse hadn't even cooled before they'd dismembered and burned it, scattering the ashes so broadly not even a wraith could be formed from the remains. A lesson the Court learned centuries ago at the knees of the first Dread Empress Sanguinia, whose reign of terror had not ended with the cup of poison she'd

drank. She had, if anything, become even more dangerous after her death. The Chancellor was a thorough man, for all his flaws, and had no intention of giving a sorcerer as accomplished as Nefarious a foot on the land of the living. The hall on the twenty-fourth floor of the Tower had long been used for official court sessions, and that the Chancellor had chosen it as the place for his summons spoke openly to the man's intentions. He'd been ruling the Empire in all but name for the last decade anyhow, no doubt he saw actually taking the throne as a mere formality. He had the backing of the High Lords, the Legions – this sad, ugly sister of what the Legions of Terror had once been – were in his pocket and he controlled Ater. Ascensions to the throne had been built on a third of that kind of support. And yet...

Amadeus gazed at the sprawling mosaic that made up the entire floor, lost in thought. The centrepiece was arguably the depiction of the First Crusade and Dread Empress Triumphant's fall, but that wasn't what interested him. Closer to the bronze and gold doors there was a motif about Dread Empress Maleficent I, the founder of the Empire. It showed her driving out the Miezans – a historical inaccuracy, as there had only been one bare skeleton of a legion left, but the lie was central to the creation myth of Praes – and uniting the Soninke and the Taghreb. She'd been Taghreb herself, governor of Kahtan under the foreign occupation. The more numerous and politically powerful Soninke had her assassinated within the decade and one of their own took the throne, but you'd never guess it from the way the High Lords were smiling at her side. Behind the humans knelt greenskins, orcs and goblins mingling in abject adoration of their superior. Another lie. The Clans had only been cajoled into joining the Declaration by bribery and the Tribes had to be forced into the fold by violence.

So many lies, for a single floor. A pack of gilded ornaments hastily slapped over an inglorious beginning, carefully polished over the millennia since until they became accepted as the truth of history. What would they say of today in a thousand years, the Black Knight wondered? Would they speak of it as the beginning of a golden age or the whimper of a stillborn rebellion? The nobles and sycophants milled about the hall, clumping together in whispering circles. None of them approached him. Some had tried to play him the fool when he'd been younger, thinking a Duni would be easy prey, but the trail of corpses he'd left behind since had dissuaded them of the notion. Still, at least some of them should have been trying to forge an alliance with him to better their fortunes under the new regime. Word of his many disagreements with the presumptive Emperor must have spread. Was this the prelude to an attempt to remove him from the game entirely? He found the thought amused him. Chancellor's intentions upon taking the throne were still a mystery to him, though he could make some educated guesses.

He was shaken out of his thoughts when the man in question strode through the open doors. The whispers stilled and the crowd parted reverently as the Chancellor walked to the throne. Running a hand on the stone and iron the man stood there for a moment, smiling. Finally, he sat and the crowd let out a single breath. Relief, envy, admiration. Already vultures were gathering behind the curtains of professed loyalty, scheming how they would carve out an advantage from the succession. There would be need for a new Chancellor, and that Name was ever brimming with claimants. For now, though, they knelt. Like a wave washing upon the floor, the mighty fell to their knees – until the wave reached him. Amadeus stood, leaning against the wall.

"You take liberties, Black Knight, that I have not allowed," the Chancellor said.

The rebuke resounded like the crack of a whip in the silence of the hall. Black pushed himself off the wall and strolled to the centre of the crowd.

"I," he said, "do not kneel."

The Chancellor chuckled.

"I may yet allow you this privilege, should you prove loyal," he said.

The fury wafting from the nobility, still kneeling, was delightful. Truly, it was making Amadeus' day. Coming here had been worth it just for that. The older man continued speaking when it became obvious Black did not intend to reply.

"You will hunt down the wretched concubine Alaya, who murdered my predecessor," the Chancellor said. "You will drag her in chains to this hall, so I may render judgement."

Amadeus smiled.

"No."

"This is an order Black Knight," the man barked. "As Dread Emperor Baleful the First, I command your obedience."

"I serve the Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, Tyrant of Dominions High and Low, Holder of the Nine Gates and Sovereign of all She Beholds," he said. "You have no right to command me, Chancellor. Or to sit on this throne."

"This is treason," the man screamed.

"This is inevitability," Amadeus replied.

Some of the crowd rose. Swords were unsheathed, incantations whispered. It would be for naught.

"Some of you," the Black Knight said, "will fight this. Will cling to the old order, futile as it may be. For you I come bearing the word of the Empress."

He grinned, wide and sharp and vicious.

"Tremble, o ye mighty, for a new age is upon you."

I woke up.

I did not gasp for air, or blink in surprise. I was just... awake. The dream I'd just had I remembered with perfect clarity, my teacher's last words echoing in my head. They felt like a warning. They felt like a promise. I pushed myself up into a sitting position only then noticing that someone's hand was on my shoulder, helping me up. Dark skin, slender fingers. Apprentice. I did not feel his touch at all. There were bound to be a few downsides to being an undead abomination, I supposed.

"Catherine," Masego said, studying me carefully through his spectacles. "Do you understand me?"

"In general?" I said. "Like, maybe half the time. The rest I just nod and pretend it's obvious."

"You just got sassed by a corpse, warlock's get," a voice said. "That's gotta sting."

I glanced in that direction and saw Robber crouched on a crate, expression unreadable. We were inside a house, I realized. Where I couldn't be sure. My throat itched and I ran a finger on it, feeling stitches. So I *could* feel some things, then. It was just muted, like I interacted with Creation through a veil.

"He cut my head off, didn't he?" I said.

"And one of your ankles, before we drove him off," Hakram said.

Him I'd known was in the room without needing to turn. I felt his Name pulse and mine answering to it. There was a connection there, one I did not yet understand. So much about Name lore still remained hidden to me. Was it the same, for Black and Captain? Hakram was, I supposed, my equivalent of the gargantuan Taghreb. With perhaps a little of Scribe thrown in for good measure.

"I guess he learned from the last time," I said, looking at my similarly stitched-up right leg. Damn, I'd run out of usable limbs at this rate. Of all the habits I could have picked up, why was getting crippled the one to stick? "Doesn't seem to be hindering me any."

"You shouldn't be able to feel pain anymore," Masego said. "Or pleasure, for that matter. You're essentially a cadaver with limited sensory abilities."

"You sweet talker you," I said, getting up. "How long was I dead?"

Even with the amulet I was wearing under my armour – a receptacle to catch my soul after I died, the way Apprentice had put it – his most conservative estimates had been that it would take him a little over a bell to raise me from the dead. Well, "raise" me was a bit of a misnomer. I was still dead, just walking about. With my soul stuck in a piece of amber hanging off my neck. I'd had better weeks.

"About an hour," Hakram said.

I blinked in surprise, or would have if my body still worked that way. My eyelids didn't move until I consciously made them do it. Gods, that was going to be weird.

"Masego?" I prompted.

Robber tossed me by sword belt, which had been taken off me at some point. I buckled deftly, noticing my men had even brought a replacement greave for the one I'd lost to goblinfire. It didn't match the rest of the gear, but unlike Heiress I didn't have half a dozen spare suits of armour to draw from.

"A force was helping me along," the bespectacled mage said. "Your Name, and... something else. It was like Creation did not want you to be dead."

"Ominous," I said, tightening the strap on the greave Hakram had handed me.

"Says the undead abomination," Robber pointed out cheerfully.

"At least I don't own a jar full of eyeballs," I said absent-mindedly. "Speaking of dodgy business, Tribune, how's your progress? Shouldn't you be out in the field?"

The goblin preened. "No need. We've got two out of three already and the third one's been found. Just a matter of time. Your little trick with the devils made it much easier to get around the city."

"Don't posture, it makes you look like the bastard child of an inexplicably green gargoyle and a pigeon," I said. "Still, good work. I want all three behind our lines the moment you can manage it. No fuckups, there's a lot riding on this."

"So I've heard," the goblin said, grinning malevolently. "Up to no good, Boss?"

"Good cut my head off not an hour ago," I muttered peevishly. "We're not exactly on speaking terms at the moment."

I turned towards the more productive members of my posse.

"Where are we, exactly?"

It looked like a house, but too small to be one from the street where I'd gotten stabbed to death. That was still a thing that had happened. I'd call this the worst week of my life, but that would just be taunting fate.

"Past the first barricade," Adjutant said. "In the forward beachhead of the Fifteenth. When it became clear the devils weren't going to be a problem Hune marched deeper into the city and smashed through their first line of defence. There's fighting at the second ring of barricades but we haven't made another push yet."

I raised an eyebrow, having to gauge approximately how high it was supposed to go. Gods, this undeath business was a pain. It was a good thing I didn't intend to stay like this for long.

"Nauk's kabili has been sent further east to assault through there. Juniper thinks if we hit them on two points they'll collapse and fall back to the Ducal Palace," Hakram said.

"If the Swordsman shows up, dividing our forces is gonna be... costly," I said.

"There's been no sign of Tall, Dark and Very Stabbable," Robber said. "Or Queen Smug. I'd put good money on them tangling as we speak."

"He barely managed to limp away after the beating you gave him," Adjutant said. "She'll have the advantage."

"That's not good," I said with a grimace. "She'll be wanting to meddle with the ritual."

And I need it, I didn't say. Only Masego and Hakram were fully in the loop as to the end game of the gambit I'd run by getting myself killed by William. Apprentice had made it clear from the beginning that while he could raise me from the dead, he couldn't actually *resurrect* me. True resurrection was the province of Good. That was the underlying pattern: Evil was handed the means to avoid death, Good to reach past it. Staying undead wasn't an option, as far as I was concerned. Masego could currently puppet me if he so wished, since he held the leash on the spells that had me walking around, but in theory someone could wrest that leash away from him. Warlock definitely could, and given Heiress' talent with sorcery given enough time I was pretty sure she'd be able to work out something too. There were advantages to my

current state but way too many liabilities came with it. Not to mention the whole being a moving corpse aspect. That would put a hamper on quite a few parts of my life, I thought, a certain redhead coming to mind.

I clenched my fingers experimentally. That part seemed to be working fine, and being able to take ridiculous amounts of punishment would come in useful. I reached for my Name and found it weaker than it had been before my death. No, not weaker. *Looser*. If before it had been a mantle draped comfortably on my shoulders, now it was hanging by a thread. Squires weren't supposed to die, I supposed. That I was still a Squire at all was something of a disappointment, to be honest.

"You're frowning," Adjutant said.

"I was hoping getting myself offed would serve as a shortcut in some ways," I said. "Maybe lead into another Name."

Masego chuckled. "You've the wrong Role for that," he said. "You are meant to be the successor to a Knight, whether Black or White. Unless one of them dies you're quite out of luck."

"Figures it wouldn't be that easy," I said. "Well, aside from a few issues it looks like my little jaunt on the other side filled up the reserves. Next time I scrape with Willy things will go differently."

"I'm not saying you should mutilate his corpse," Robber said. "But, you know, if you happen to stumble onto a few eyes I know this guy who has a collection."

"You don't even eat them," Adjutant complained. "It's a waste, is what that is."

"I'm going to pretend I never heard that," I confided in Masego. "When those words I'm definitely not hearing stop, tell Hakram to find his shield. The three of us are going for yet another horrifying magical adventure."

—

It was up to debate whether we had good or bad timing, because Hune was about done preparing for her push when we arrived. The ogre was looking at a map held up against a ruined wall by two legionaries, still coming up taller than it even crouched. She saluted crisply when the three of us arrived.

"Lady Squire, Lord Apprentice," she said, then paused. "Deadhand."

Deadhand and Dead Girl, I thought, running around foiling Good. There was a song in there.

"What's the situation, Commander?" I asked.

"Commander Nauk has begun his offensive," the ogre said. "Already the rebels have started stripping their defences here to reinforce the east. Legate Juniper intends for us to hit them when the troops are beyond the two points, overwhelming them in detail."

Good ol' Hellhound, baiting the enemy into a mistake and then slitting their throat over it.

"Any sign of the heroes?" I said.

"None at the moment," the gargantuan woman said. "Though we have sapper lines ready should they make an appearance. I take it you're here to join the assault, my lady?"

"We won't be sticking around," I said. "We'll be using it as cover to head for a target deeper into the city."

The ogre nodded slowly, the clever eyes set in that brutish face studying me patiently.

"The place where the ritual is," she said. "You believe the Lady Heiress intends further mischief."

"Something like that," I said.

The ogre's buckler-sized hands tightened into fists. There seemed to be genuine anger in him, perhaps the first display of open emotion I'd ever seen from her.

"That woman is in dire need of killing," Hune rumbled. "Treason against the Tower cannot be tolerated."

"Preaching to the choir there," I said. "Who's at the tip of your offensive?"

"Tribune Ubaid," Hune said.

Ah, an old friend then. No doubt the former captain would find this scrap a pleasant stroll after our fun little evening with the devils near Marchford. Interesting choice to put regulars in front, but I supposed that with all the fresh recruits in the Fifteenth Hune was looking to blood some of her legionaries.

"I'll get out of your hair, Hune," I said.

"Good hunting, Lady Squire. One sin," the ogre said hammering a hand against her breastplate.

"One grace," I replied, doing the same.

Finding Ubaid was easy enough. His legionaries were already formed up, the rest of the kabili falling in line behind them. The Soninke was inspecting the gear of his first line, handing out praise and criticism freely. His cohort of two hundred milled with excitement as we approached, smelling the blood to come. The man himself snapped a sharp salute.

"Lady Squire."

"Ubaid," I said warmly. "We'll be joining you for the assault."

"An argument could be made they'll be joining us," Masego said.

"Don't mind Apprentice," I said, "he always gets crabby right before the swords come out."

"I do *not*-"

"You're making her point for her, Masego," Hakram whispered loudly.

The mage closed his mouth with a snap, looking disgruntled. Ubaid looked like he badly wanted to be somewhere else but was too polite to flee. It would be strange going into battle without the Gallowborne at my back, but I'd elected to leave them behind since I wouldn't be taking them with me to the ritual site anyway. Currently they were with Juniper at the central command node, charged with guarding the trump cards I'd tasked Robber with finding me. I took the lead as we began the march, the other two at my side. Hune had chosen one of the main arteries as her angle of attack, though I could glimpse legionaries spread out over the two adjoining streets as well. Tribune Ubaid's cohort remained concentrated on the avenue we were using, as per Legion doctrine. It was a short walk to the second ring of barricades, and when we got there I saw there were already sappers in place. A company at most, but they were keeping the rebels busy by taking crossbow shots whenever a Callowan peeked out from behind the barricades.

I was reluctantly impressed by what the defenders had managed to build as their rampart. Unlike the upended carts and sacks of sand and grain of the first barricades, these ones had foundations of stone pulled from Gods knew where. There was narrow path through the rampart leading straight into a smaller barricade, which would force my legionaries to split between two sides when trying to overwhelm it. I couldn't see what the defenders were standing on from where I was, but some sort of scaffolding must have been built behind the wall: a handful of men were watching us, crouching down behind the walls whenever one of the sappers took aim at them. Taking this promised to be costly, I assessed, and the numbers were on the side of the defenders. As far as I could figure Hune was going to collapse the barricades with munitions and charge through the wreck as

soon as the defenders were positioned to stop Ubaid's cohort, catching them flatfooted. It should work. The prospect of the losses displeased me, though. On both sides.

What point was there in continuing to kill the rebels when the battle was as good as done? Without William around to stiffen their spines, I might actually be able to talk them into a surrender. It was worth a try instead of jumping straight into the slaughter, anyway. I signalled for Ubaid's cohort to slow and went for the wall, sword still sheathed. From the corner of my eye I saw one of the archers knocking an arrow and waited – the shaft was released and I tapped into my Name, watching it come closer. Snatching the arrowhead out of the air was what I was intending to do, but it ended up being more along the line of catching it with my palm. There was, I reflected, no real way to play that off as if it had been my intention all along. I didn't feel any pain from the wound, so simply sighed and broke off the shaft before wiggling the rest out. There was a gasp of horror from the barricade and I heard someone say the word Squire. Good, there'd be no need for introductions. Some of the sappers were about to answer the shot in kind so I immediately spoke up.

"Hold," I said. "You, behind the walls. I'm Catherine Foundling, ranking commander of the Fifteenth. Who's in charge here?"

There was a round of hushed conversation behind cover until a confident voice quieted it. A few heartbeats later a woman rose to the top of the barricade, dressed in good plate. Even under the helmet I recognized those silvery strands of hair and that pale, strikingly beautiful face: it appeared I was in front of the Baroness Dormer herself. I'd seen her exactly once before, when I'd been a child. She'd visited Laure to settle a trade dispute and I'd managed to be part of the crowd watching her ride into the city. I'd skipped lessons for it, if I remembered well, because I'd wanted to see the noble so many people said was the loveliest woman in Callow with my own eyes. I cleared my throat, absurdly amused to be standing in front of the same woman who'd made me realize I was attracted to both genders in such a different situation.

"That would be me," the Baroness said. "You'll forgive for not bowing, Lady Foundling. I no longer recognize the authority of the Tower."

"So I've heard," I said drily.

"I was also under the impression you were dead," the woman continued.

"Not nearly as much of a problem as you'd think," I mused.

"Impressive, but we planned to defend the city against you regardless," the Baroness said. "I have no intention of surrendering my men so they can be butchered in Malicia's name."

"That's about to happen if you *don't* surrender, Baroness," I said. "I'm willing to give you fairly lenient terms to end this without further bloodshed. Prisoners will be treated fairly."

The silver-haired woman's eyes narrowed.

"The Tower has only one way of dealing with rebellion."

"You've been out of the loop for too long," I said. "Black granted amnesty to the vast majority of the Countess Marchford's host. Nobody wants to drown the south in blood, least of all me."

"The vast majority," she repeated. "And what of the Countess herself?"

"Executed," I admitted. "That, however, was Black. He's not here, I am. Liesse is mine to deal with as I see fit, by Imperial mandate. If you surrender I promise amnesty for your men and a fair trial for you."

She seemed almost amused by that.

"That I committed treason by the Tower's reckoning isn't exactly in dispute," she said.

"No, it isn't," I said. "But all I've heard of you leads me to believe you got involved in this because you believed Callow would be better off for the rebellion. That rebellion is over, Baroness Dormer. But you can still spare the people who fought for you."

She hesitated.

"We could hold you off behind the barricades," she said.

"Apprentice could level those with three words and a wave of his hand," I said matter-of-factly.

"Five and really more of a flick," the overweight mage corrected.

"Not the time, Masego," I said under my breath, watching the noblewoman on the wall.

"The Lone Swordsman said you were treacherous and silver-tongue," she admitted ruefully.

"I'm sure he's said a lot of things. You should be more worried about the things he *hasn't* said, though. I'm betting he didn't inform you that the ritual going on is to bring an angel of Contrition to the city," I said.

She paled, and just like that I knew I had her. *William, you didn't think this through. They're not heroes, they're just people. No one signed up for your personal Crusade. It's one thing to be ready to die for Callow, it's another to be conscripted by the Heavens.*

"You're lying," the Baroness said.

"Noticed how he stopped carrying that sword of his around? That was a Hashmallim's feather, I'm told. Three guesses what it's being used for, and the first two are also summoning an angel," I said.

"How can you be so *pithy* about this?" she asked, sounding horrified.

"Because I'm going to cut his throat – for the second time today, mind you – and put an end to all of this," I said. "This is what I *do*, Baroness. I clean up the messes made by the fools. I did it at Three Hills, I did it at Marchford and I'll do it again here. Gods as my witness, I'll keep on going until there's peace from Daoine to the shores of the Hengest."

I met her eyes calmly.

"I could threaten you now," I said. "Point out that I punched a devil the size of a fortress so hard it died or that I basically walked off getting decapitated not an hour ago. But I don't really need to, do I? You know who I am. What I'm going to tell you instead is that I've had a very long day – and that I won't be making this offer twice."

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Choose."

She folded. She dithered a while still, but she folded. I wished it actually felt like a victory, and not like I'd just broken my homeland's spine over my knee. I didn't stick around to oversee the rest of the surrender. I handed it off to Hune after getting in contact with Nauk's kabili with a scrying spell. The orc commander had already broken through his section of the barricade but my orders were enough to restrain him even after he'd gotten his blood up. The Baroness managed to get most of the remaining soldiers to surrender, but some refused and tried to retreat. There was only one way that was going to end, but I didn't have the time to spare pity for the last gasps of this rebellion. We headed north again, towards the lake.

"The site won't actually be *in* Creation," Apprentice said. "Well, technically yes, but depending on whether or not you adhere to orthodox Trismegistan theory it-"

"Masego," I said sharply.

The dark-skinned man cleared his throat.

"I'm saying getting there won't be as simple as taking a rowboat and rowing to an island that doesn't, precisely speaking, exist."

"If you were trying to make this simpler," Hakram said gravely, "you have failed."

Apprentice looked frustrated, passing a hand through his sweaty mess of braids. We'd taken a brisk pace, and military life had yet to get him in better shape.

"Look," he said. "This place is an angel's corpse, more or less. Angels are *of* Creation, but not *in* Creation."

I ignored the "depending on what school of thought you believe is correct as to the nature of Spheres and Laws" he added in a mutter afterwards. I didn't know if it was possible to have a headache while undead and wasn't particularly eager to find out.

"Practically speaking," I said, "what does that mean?"

"The site is effectively on Creation without being part of it," Masego said. "Like a pebble on a larger rock. There are... rules though. There has to be a way in, for something like that to be able to exist. A connecting point, where the pebble touches the rock."

"So we use that," Hakram said.

"That would be ideal," Apprentice said. "If it's still there."

I glanced at the bespectacled mage. "You think Heiress blocked the way?"

"Or the Lone Swordsman," he said. "If he knows how."

William had never struck as being particularly knowledgeable about stuff like this, but he didn't have to be. Not with the Wandering Bard on his team. *And isn't your absence starting to make me a little nervous, Almorava? What are you up to?* Guided by Apprentice, we eventually happened upon the shore of the Hengest lake. There were actual docks further east but that wasn't what Masego had been looking for, apparently. I was pretty sure what he had was right in front of us: a small, thin rowboat without oars. It was pale and the prow was swan-shaped. It was also on fire, which was much less promising. Almost nothing but the prow remained, the rest sinking into the water.

"I'm thinking Heiress," I said.

"It does bear her tender and delicate touch," Adjutant said.
"Apprentice, I hope you have another way to get us in."

"No," the Soninke said then remained silent for a moment. "Not us, anyway."

"You made that unnecessarily tense," I told him gently.

He blinked in confusion and I decided there were more pressing matters at hand.

"Explain," I said.

"Pebble, larger rock," he said.

"Many syllables," I said, "Catherine confused."

"And so they all died, because the Squire couldn't ever miss an opportunity to be sarcastic," Hakram said gravely.

I cleared my throat, or at least tried. The sound that came out was more like I was choking on my own lungs. Dying was proving increasingly troublesome.

"Look," Apprentice said. "The rule is, there must be a connection. There's none available, so Creation will work with me if I try to make one. I'm creating a second, smaller pebble that touches both the larger pebble and the rock."

"Honestly, you could have just said you're creating a pocket dimension that touches both the site and Creation," I said.

"Gods, why am I even on your side?" Masego complained, throwing up his hands in the air.

"You like us, though Hells if I know why," I said, patting him on the back. "Now about that metaphorical smaller pebble. You went all exacting in a way I'm guessing means not all of us can go."

"I'll be casting," Apprentice said. "And I need an anchor, temporary as it will be."

"Does it have to be Hakram?" I asked.

"That depends," he replied. "Do you want the pocket realm to collapse on you while I get non-Named smear on my boots?"

"No," Adjutant interrupted before I could reply. "No she does not."

I shot the orc a look. I'd been going to say as much. Eventually.

"So just me, then," I said. "This doesn't feel even remotely like a coincidence."

"Three Named want this city," Hakram said. "Three Named fight for it. The pattern comes to a head."

"This is about more than just Liesse," I said. "This is about all of Callow."

I started to pass a hand through my hair but remembered halfway through the gesture I was still wearing my helmet. Awkwardly I brought the arm down, hoping neither of them had noticed. I cleared my throat again, this time with a little more success.

"Do your thing, Apprentice."

—

Apparently Masego couldn't just wave his arm and rewrite the fabric of Creation, which was very inconvenient of him. I almost told him as much but Hakram gave me a look of his own. I almost tried to pout at Adjutant, but refrained when I forced myself to visualize how horrifying it would actually look. It took too long for Apprentice to prepare his spell for my tastes, but before an hour had passed he was ready.

"The entrance will only be open for a handful of heartbeats," he warned me. "Be quick. And remember, you'll have to find your own way back."

He put a hand on Hakram's shoulder and spoke urgently in the mage tongue, palm pointed in front of him. I almost didn't see the portal when it appeared. It was transparent and oval – and shorter than me. Adjutant likely wouldn't have been able to fit through even if he hadn't been needed as an anchor. Gritting my teeth, I took a running start and threw myself into the pocket dimension.

I landed in a roll on the other side, managing to stay on my feet for a moment before the disorientation hit and I fell in a sprawl. I hastily got up, warily casting a look around. I was apparently on a wide strip of rock that stood over an inky black void. Charming. I didn't get close enough to the edge to have a look down. I did not want to be the first undead to ever throw up. I'd never been great with heights, even if the crippling aspect of that fear was long behind me. The terrain ahead of me was broken, full of spires and pitfalls. I made my face grimace out of sheer distaste for the work ahead of me, then got moving. Climbing higher allowed me to peer in the distance, where I saw a gate of light. At least that part was visible. I got halfway through before I slipped and fell at the bottom of well of spires, cursing loudly on my way down. Plate armour wasn't exactly climbing gear, even when you no longer felt its weight. I wedged my boot in an opening and clasped my fingers around an outcropping that should allow me to pull myself out when my arm started trashing about.

The spells animating me? No. I felt heat for the first time since I'd woken up, searing and bloody. Worse than even getting hit with William's light had felt. I fell back down, screaming in pain as my limbs shook uncontrollably. How long that lasted I couldn't tell, but eventually my limbs stilled. I felt... empty. Like some part of me was missing.

"Funny," a voice said. "That should have killed you."

I looked up and saw a face peering down at me over the rocky ridge. Half of one, anyway. Horrific burns and sword wound had taken most of the left half. The rest was of a red nearly orange. I'd only ever met one goblin that colour.

"Chider," I rasped.

"Please, Catherine," the dead goblin said, "Call me Squire."

Smiling pleasantly, she dropped a lit sharper on my head.

Chapter 46: Squire (Redux)

"Note: only offer the hero the chance to replace my right-hand man when my right-hand man is no longer in the room.

Additional note: find out estimated rebuilding cost for the summer palace."

-Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

Two things happened in quick succession.

First, I snarled something very unkind about Chider's mother and a he-goat. Second, I snatched the sharper out of the air and threw it back up. Unlike during my first run-in with the goblin, I was now familiar with goblin munitions. I knew how long they took to blow – the standard issue stuff anyway. The sharper exploded halfway up, giving me a gentle hint the mixture had been tinkered with. What was it with all my enemies getting their hands on goblin munitions? The Legions really needed to keep a closer eye on their stocks: they were supposed to be the only organisation with access to munitions. I'd have a talk with Black about it, I was starting to get pretty irritated with how people kept throwing those at me.

"Yeah, I won't be calling you that," I said, dragging myself up to my feet.

I'd expected to feel aftershocks of what I was pretty sure had been my Name getting ripped out of me, but there were none. My limbs moved surely and smoothly. The pain must have been in my soul, horrifying as that thought was. I could still feel an itch in the back of my neck, though, almost like I was missing a limb. Chider replied to my polite announcement by dropping a

brightstick, this prepared to blow up directly in my face. One of these days, the Gods were going to have to grant me dumber enemies. There had to be a finite number of clever ones, and I was starting to murder my way through that list. I ignored the falling cylinder and wedged my foot into a crevasse. The flash of light and the deafening noise might have been a problem if I were still alive, but at the moment I was past worrying about burst eardrums. They'd make no real difference.

Jumping while in full plate would have been hard even when I'd still had my Name, but I was just about done playing around. Ripping a few muscles to get the job done wasn't something I was going to balk at. My first leap got me halfway up and I forced my limbs into making me jump again when I hit the side of the pit, landing in a sprawl back on top. I heard Chider scuttling away from me, hiding in the rocks. The novelty of having an enemy shorter and physically weaker than myself was quite refreshing. Well, weaker for now. She'd be settling into the Name any moment now, and it was all downhill from there.

"I should have seen this coming, really," I said. "Warlock mentioned the only place in Callow to 'bind or usurp a Name' was in Liesse. Figured I was safe with no other claimant around, but that was evidently incorrect. Breaking the laws of nature to screw me over – classic Heiress."

I heard the snap of a crossbow being shot and turned in time to see the bolt coming for my chest. My hand snapped up, following my will, and snatched the projectile out of the air. *One out of two*, I mused, breaking the haft and dropping it on the ground. I'd had better success rates, but also much worse.

"The part of this that puzzles me," I continued, "is *you*. You're smarter than this, Chider. I'm on my way to fighting my two rivals and you're a middling threat standing between us. There's only one way this can go for you."

The undead goblin slipped out of the rocks to my side, jamming a knife in my knee joint. Frowning, I slapped her across the face. I hadn't held back even a little bit and it showed: her neck twisted sharply with an unpleasant sound. She picked herself up from the rock the hit had thrown her against, idly snapping her neck back in place. No full resurrection for her either, then. Weren't we quite the pair, jolly undead abominations brawling in the middle of place that had been freshly forced into existence? I took the knife out of my knee, gauging the weight of it. Good goblin steel. It would do.

"That would be true," Chider said as she rose to her feet, "if you were still the Squire. You're free meat now, Callow-girl."

I sighed.

"I'm serious," I said. "What's the end game for you here? Say you manage to somehow destroy my body. Heiress manages whatever the Hells she's up to with your help. What do you do *after*?"

"I change things," Chider replied, pulling out another knife.

Gods, was that what I sounded like to other people? No wonder I got stabbed so often. *Never assume a goblin is out of knives*, I thought, watching her twirl the blade between her fingers. Robber carried so many that by all rights he should clink whenever he walked around.

"As the Squire?" I said. "The moment Black meets you, he'll hack you to pieces to put the Name back in play. If he's in a bad mood, he'll give what's left of you to Warlock. Do you still dream, Chider? Because that's the stuff of very real nightmares."

"I have friends of my own," the goblin said.

"No, what you have is an *owner*," I said. "And she's not gentle with her tools – today should have shown you that clearly enough. Chider, you're about to get thrown under the carriage. You really think Heiress is going to stick her head out for you? Gods, you think the *Truebloods* will? They don't hide what they think about greenskins."

Snarling, the goblin attacked. Rude. She could have at least informed me we were done talking. What was it with telling people they were wrong about everything that made them so aggressive? Already Chider was faster, quick enough she was hard to follow with the naked eye. I felt the blade scrape my chest plate but it failed to go through and I kicked her before she could stick it into my neck. Honestly, I wasn't sure what she thought that would do at this point. Make me bleed out? My heart wasn't beating anymore, and the stuff inside my veins was basically red water giving me a little more mass. I caught her wrist when she came for me again, initially forcing it back before something dark flared in her leering eyes. She begun turning the struggle around. Name strength, I decided, was a lot less pleasant from the other side. I spun around her and helpfully handed her back her knife, sticking it into her neck. Didn't seem to have much effect, but my boot on her back did: she was sent sailing again.

"You think I don't *know* all of this?" Chider spat, landing in a crouch, "I'm not drowning in options, Foundling, unlike you. I'll survive today, then tomorrow and then the day after that. That's what goblins *do*. We survive, even when Creation is out for our blood."

I unsheathed my own knife.

"You know," I said thoughtfully, "I think that a year ago I would have tried to help you. To compromise. But I've lost too many friends since, Chider. Crossed too many lines to turn back."

That burned face split into a horrifying grin.

"If you think I'll lay down and die for your little narcissism trip," she said, "you're in for a rude awakening."

Fair enough. I strolled forward, pace unhurried. She darted in my direction but I feinted for her hand. Unnaturally quick, she brought up her knife to block – and I swiped mine across her face, ripping through her teeth. She backedpedalled hurriedly, free hand coming up to touch the ruined fangs.

"I've been doing all this talking," I said. "You probably thought it was a blunder. She's been Named too long, she got cocky. What I was actually doing, though, was giving them time to settle in."

She leapt for me with a howl but that was mere savagery. I'd fought more dangerous things than an angry undead goblin in the past, even a Named one. Hells, I'd fought more dangerous things *today*. I calmly stepped aside, left her to slide on the rock and feinted for her eyes. The knife came up again, faster than a blink, but I'd already redirected the strike and was ripping through the shoulder muscles on the right. She'd likely thought she was being clever when she'd traded chain mail for leather, banking on speed over taking hits. Her limp right arm now taught her differently.

"The reflexes, I mean," I said as I circled around her. "They take a while to get used to, don't they? I remember how odd it was when I first came into the Name, getting a set of reactions that weren't entirely mine."

I brought up the tip of my knife and this time she reacted properly, not falling for the probe – which didn't help her when my other hand unsheathed my sword and hacked through her bad arm. The limb fell to the ground. I intended for this to be theme for the evening, as it happened.

"You can ignore them, of course," I said. "But that costs you a moment, while you push them down. A lot can happen in a moment. Still, I imagine that given a fortnight you'd get used to it."

My eyes turned cold.

"Unfortunately for you, you don't have a fortnight."

Chider spat out teeth, bringing up her knife.

"Fuck you, Callow-girl," she said. "No matter what you do, I will **Surv-**"

I rammed my sword through her mouth, tip coming out on the other side. There would be no aspect comeback for this one. I jammed my knife into the soft side of her elbow, cleaving the muscle. Her fingers convulsed around her weapon but there'd be no more swinging at me. Holding her upright, I ripped out the clasps holding the upper part of her leather armour together. The flesh under was scarred with burns, barely even flesh at all.

"I warned you," I said, "*Now give me back my Name.*"

I struck her as hard as I could, my armoured fingers ripping into her flesh. I dug through the necrotized organs, finding the snake-like length of her spine after jostling around a bit. Hand inside the goblin up to my elbow, I grit my teeth and tore out her spine. It snapped halfway through her abdomen and Chider fell limp. Dropping her to the ground after withdrawing my smeared gauntlet, I wrenched out my sword and beheaded her for good measure. I stood there, eyes closed. I would have let out a breath if there'd been any air in my lungs. I did not have to wait for long before awareness flooded into me for the second time in my life. It felt like coming home.

I was Catherine Foundling, daughter of no one and nothing. I'd broken armies, snatched victory from the jaws of my enemy. I'd spent lives like coin and bought the fate of a kingdom, cheated death and spat in the face of Corruption. On the night I'd first claimed this Name, I'd branded my path on the soul of a hero. And on the night where I claimed it again, that path was coming to an end. I was, once more, the Squire.

My senses sharpened and I waited for the beast that rode my shoulders to make itself known, already smiling. I'd almost grown fond of it. The expression faded when it made no appearance. I frowned and sunk in the depths of my Name. They felt shallower now. Not weaker, but as if the depths had not yet been... earned. My blood ran cold when I realized I had not claimed *back* my Name – I'd just claimed it, period. I was starting at the beginning again, and I couldn't feel a single one of my aspects. Just the potential for them, those bundles of shapeless power. My eyes opened in sheer surprise. Those *three* bundles of shapeless power.

"Oh, Heiress," I said gleefully. "*You fucked up.*"

Chider had been her work, of that there was no doubt, but why would Akua have done this at all if she knew it would give me back strength? I might not have my aspects anymore, but my Name was effectively restored to the strength it had possessed before my run-in with the demon. I had the well of power to effectively use the tricks Black had taught me once more. Why would Heiress make me stronger? She'd made a habit out of sabotaging me at every turn. Even if she was planning on using me against William, this made no sense. *Unless she didn't know she was doing that*, I thought. Only two people knew there had been more to my crippling

than the leg: Masego and Hakram. And Black, though that hardly counted.

I'd not told another living soul, and as far as I knew neither had they. And it wasn't like Heiress could just take a look at my aspects whenever she pleased: Apprentice had needed to set up an entire room full of hellishly complicated wards to operate on my soul. Akua had never been allowed into the Fifteenth's camp without heavy guard, and any use of magic on her part would have been met with immediate force. She hadn't known, I realized. She hadn't known I'd robbed myself of an aspect. She'd thought that by using Chider as a receptacle for my Name she could weaken me for months, maybe even kill me when she ripped it out – if she was lucky. That was the thing with luck, wasn't it? It never landed quite where you'd thought it would.

"And instead you put me back on the horse, you scheming bitch you," I murmured.

Gods Below, it was about time one of her little plots backfired. Now I just needed to cram her next one down her throat and make her choke on it. I knelt by Chider's twice-dead corpse, wiping my sword on her before sheathing it. I did the same with my knife after wrenching it out. If I'd had anything to set her on fire just to be sure I would have, but for now this would have to be enough. I didn't have any munitions on me, much less goblinfire – not that using a substance that burned magic in a dimension made by a mage wouldn't have been a horrible idea anyway. I peered in the distance and saw the gate of light was still there. For how long that would remain the case I wasn't sure, but I thought it best to hurry.

Feeling the mantle of my Name on my shoulders after that distressing period where I hadn't made a tedious procession more tolerable. I could no longer remember what I'd felt like before I'd become the Squire. Being entirely human was just a... hazy concept. I was beyond sickness now, beyond the old limitations of my body like heat and cold or not being able to tinker with my own senses. After tasting true power, there was nothing more horrifying than being powerless. The honesty of that thought made me uncomfortable.

It was hard to gauge lengths of time in a place without a real sky, but I felt like I'd kept a good pace. The gate of light I'd glimpsed at a distance was even taller than I'd thought, thrice my height – so more or less twice anyone else's – and almost as broad. I couldn't make out anything beyond it. Apprentice had said there would be a way into the ritual site, but I found it odd he hadn't said anything about a gate. For that matter, if he could make a gate why hadn't he crafted one for me to enter here in the first place? I frowned, then picked up a stone from the

ground and threw it. For a moment it looked like it would pass through, but then there was a flash of light and a loud bang.

"You're getting predictable, Akua," I said.

Stepping around the gate, I found the exit Masego had actually made after looking for a few moments. Like the portal that had allowed me through, it was transparent and hard to make out in the lack of proper lighting. Akua's false gate was just close enough to make it hard through wiggle through, because why make it just a death trap when you could also make it an inconvenience? I took a deep breath I didn't strictly need, finding the familiarity of it reassuring.

"Final round, winner takes all," I muttered before passing through.

Chapter 47: And Justice For All

"The question of who the most vindictive people of Calernia are has long been debated. Some say it is the Arlesites, who will duel to the death over the use of the wrong adjective in a verse. Others say it is those of the Free Cities, where the moving of a border by half a mile will spawn a war lasting three generations. Others yet say it is the Praesi, who indulge in political assassination the way other nations enjoy a cup of good wine. I would humbly put forward, however, that the answer is the people of Callow. Steal an apple from a farmer of the Kingdom and fifty years later his grandson will find yours on the other side of the continent, sock him in the eye and take three apples back."

– Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

I landed in sand.

Hastily I got up and brushed away the mess, taking an assessing look around. I was on an island, looked like, a perfect circle with some kind of shoddy chapel built in the middle. The water surrounding it went on for a dozen feet before stopping abruptly into darkness that looked much like the one that had surrounded Masego's bridge. I eyed the dark, deciding to be very careful about falling in there. I wasn't sure what the rules were here, but I doubted that anything pleasant would come out of tripping into the endless void. I unsheathed my sword, ears prickling at the sound of struggle inside the structure. I moved quietly towards the open doors, only pausing when I glimpsed runes on the side of the chapel. Heiress' work, or had they always been there? Without knowing that I couldn't risk messing them up. For all I knew, scraping a line through one of those would have the Hashmallim knocking at the door in a matter of moments. I'd rather not fight an angel if I could avoid it, really. I'd been in some pretty rough fights over the last year

but I doubted I'd walk away from that one. Before I could cross the gate there was a loud bang and someone was thrown out. William landed on his feet, sword raised, and snarled. I pressed against the side of the wall just out of his sight.

"I begin to sympathize with the Miezian extermination of your kind," the hero said.

That didn't really narrow down the possibilities as to what he was scrapping with. The Miezans had been pretty liberal with extermination policies. A tall silhouette of smokeless fire strode out into the sands, its face without features.

"There's no need to be rude about this," it said in a calm, cultured voice.

It raised a hand towards William, spawning a stream of fire from the palm. The hero blocked it with his sword, light flaring as he forced back the sorcery. Well, I wished them fun with that. The Lone Swordsman was going to get a good stabbing before this was over, but I had nothing against letting whatever Heiress had summoned soften him up first. Might even make him a tad less impossible to kill. I waited for their fight to take them around the island and slipped inside. For an angel's corpse, this place was pretty dingy. Two rows of stone benches – seven on each side, which didn't feel like a coincidence – led up to an altar with a sword in it. *A sword in a stone*. That... had a shape to it. A story. Something I might be able to use, if I played this right. I recognized the sword in the stone, as it happened. It was the same bitch of a blade William had used in most of our fights. An angels' feather, used to summon another angel. There were candles behind the stone, seven of them. Most of them had melted, with only two remaining.

There was someone by the altar, looking down on it as she tinkered with runes hanging in the air. Heiress, and would you look at that her back was to me. I crept forward silently, hugging the wall. As my practical decision of the day, I'd come to the conclusion that a sword in the back was a victory I could live with. It would be almost poetic, considering how often she'd slid the metaphorical knife into mine. From the corner of my eye I saw something blur in the air on the opposite side of the chapel, near a pillar. Someone dropped quietly to the ground, looking harried, and Masego looked about ready to retch. The blur disappeared and Apprentice took a look around, eyes finding me after a moment. He opened his mouth to talk, then thought better about it. I gestured towards Heiress and he nodded. Taking a long breath, I reached for the depths of my Name and formed a spear of shadows. Flying faster than an arrow, it tore through Masego's head, dissipating the illusion.

"Well," Heiress said. "It was worth a try."

I noticed the silhouette by the altar wasn't where the sound came from. I couldn't quite pin down where it did.

"He already told me I was on my own in here," I said. "For now, anyway. They'll find another way through eventually."

The fake Heiress dropped to all fours, a sight that would have amused me if it didn't imply there was actually something under that particular illusion.

"You know, if I remember correctly you actually have a sword," I said. "Yet you never seem to use it. Afraid of a little tussle, Akua? I promise I'll be gentle."

I closed my eyes and expanded my senses. Whatever the fake-Heiress was, she didn't seem to breathe. I couldn't hear the actual Heiress do that either, though, so it was worth taking with a grain of salt. The illusion ran towards me and I immediately got away from the wall to make some space. The creature leapt over a bench but my senses told me otherwise: I swung my sword to the side and hit flesh, a bald creature of rotted flesh and fangs blinking into existence as it screamed and scampered back. The fake-Heiress passed harmlessly through me as the creature disappeared again.

"Is that a ghoul?" I asked. "Scraping the bottom of the barrel there."

There was an airy chuckle.

"Seen your little redhead mage, lately?"

I took a sharp breath. No, it couldn't be Kilian. She was safe with the mages of the Fifteenth, surrounded by hundreds of legionaries. *Akua has spies in the ranks*, my mind provided. *She could have abducted her*. And then killed her and turned her into a ghoul, just for the sake of messing with me? No. She'd not planned for me to make it this far. Chider had been her trump card to get me out of the game, make me unable to interfere with whatever she was up to. If I hadn't been dead already, getting my Name ripped out would probably have made me unconscious – if not killed me outright. She was just playing mind games.

"You'd probably be a better liar if you weren't so smug," I said.

The patter of feet against stone was heard behind me, but it wasn't what I was watching for. When Heiress spoke, the words resounded in every part of the chapel – except one. The corner to the left of the door. I allowed the invisible ghoul to come close, then ducked when it leapt for my chest – my sword came up, ripping through the creature's stomach as it passed over me. The screaming, wriggling shape blocked the sight of my free hand for a moment and I formed a burst of shadows, pivoting to fire it at

the too-silent corner. It hit a shield that flared blue, revealing the silhouette of a frowning Akua underneath.

"Found you," I said.

"Chider failed, I see," she said.

"Oh, she did exactly what you intended," I smiled. "You're just not as smart as you seem to think you are."

"Coming from *you*," she said, "that is truly insulting."

The ghoul came for the third time and I waited for it to rush – then snatched a limb out of the air. I swung the creature like an improvised flail, smashing her against the bench. Really, a *ghoul*. And she had the gall to say *I* was being insulting. Keeping a hand on the struggling creature, I hacked through her head calmly and returned my attention to Heiress. Who was smiling. Oh dear. The undead creature exploded a moment later, and as I was thrown against the wall all I could think was that undead bombs was *my* godsdamned gambit. Leaving the protection of her shield, Akua slowly unsheathed her sword. It was an ornate piece, gilded and the length of it covered in runes. Why did everyone else get to have a fancy magic sword? I shrugged off the impact and rose to my feet, my own sword still in hand.

"Do you know what irritates me the most about you, Catherine Foundling?" she smiled.

"I have better hair," I replied and burst forward.

She raised her blade in a classic guard, which almost made me grin. I'd fought plenty of people using that before. They were all dead. I batted her sword away and got in close, swiping for her eyes. She danced away, making distance between us. Her free hand came up, crackling with energy, but I ducked under the bolt of lightning and hit her stomach with the pommel of my sword, bending the lamellar steel with the impact. She let out a grunt of pain that was music to my ears before forcing me back with an attempt to slice through my neck.

"Please, continue to pontificate," I said. "Where's my monologue, Akua? You're turning into a disappointment of a rival."

"You wretch," she snarled, and brought up her hand to cast again.

I laughed and smashed her wrist with my blade – steel ground against steel, failing to cut through but forcing it down. The ball of flame that erupted hit the ground at her feet, blowing her away as the heat licked at my face.

"You know," I said as I walked towards her prone form, "I always assumed that even behind the scheming you'd be able to give me a good fight. But you can't, can you?"

I smiled coldly.

"I might be a little heavy on the brute force, Akua, but even thugs have their day."

I raised my sword above her and... froze. The fear on the dark-skinned girl's face melted away as she rose to her feet calmly. My body began rising in the air, hovering a foot above the floor.

"You are not Evil," she said. "That is what irritates me most about you, Catherine. You just ape the methods, reassuring yourself your intentions are still Good. You act like your Name is a weapon and ignore that it has a *meaning*."

She slid her fingers down the length of her blade, the runes shining at the touch.

"Your master is the same. Lord Black, fear of the continent," she mocked. "He is a rat hiding at the center of maze of traps he spent decades building. Dangerous, perhaps, but behind all the tricks he is *weak*."

She chuckled.

"No matter how clever the traps, they will not save him from a boot. You shy away from what you are, Foundling, and Creation abhors such spineless dithering. I know what I am. I embrace it, because *that is what a villain is*. That is why I have power..."

Her sword rose.

"Monologues," I said, "Not even once."

The Lone Swordsman hit her with a burst of light before I even finished talking. I dropped back to the ground with a pleased hum: his little Name trick messed with sorcery as well as my own Name shenanigans, it seemed. William, covered in soot, eyed me with horror.

"All according to plan," I lied.

"You're dead," the Lone Swordsman said. "*I cut your head off*."

"Eh," I shrugged. "I got over it."

I paused.

"Also, you were supposed to reply —"

I had to backpedal away hurriedly when Heiress threw some sort of orb of shadows where we were standing. Her armour was smoking, and for once she actually looked frazzled. Her hair was messed up, I noted with amusement. First time I'd ever seen her look anything but pristine. Heiress was next to the altar, though she steered clear of the sword. Good, now everyone was here. I could actually begin using my bastard cousin of a plan, though... I frowned, looking at the candles behind the altar. Another one had melted entirely, leaving only the last. *I thought they represented seven hours each*, I thought.

"William," I said.

"No," he said immediately.

I ignored that part for the sake of convenience.

"When you were last here, did time pass normally?"

His eyes flicked to the candles, and his face turned white.

"That's impossible," he said.

I knew time passed differently in Arcadia – it was the basis of the trick Black had used to get to Marchford in a fraction of the time it would have taken him on a horse. And Arcadia worked that way because it wasn't in Creation proper. Which meant...

"You moved the entire island elsewhere," I said. "That's what the runes on the chapel are for. "

"You mean to trap the Hashmallim," the hero said.

Heiress stood tall against the glare directed at her by the Lone Swordsman, almost preening.

"This is my house now," she said. "And the only rules here are mine."

Shit. Couldn't let that go unchallenged, not if I wanted my plan to actually work.

"This is Callowan ground, wherever it may be," I said. "Back me up on this, William."

Akua scoffed. "The truth cannot be-"

"Shut the Hells up, Praesi," the hero barked. "These grounds are of the Kingdom as long as I live."

Good ol' Willy. You could always count on him to screw over at least one person in the room at any time.

"You're right," I said. "She *is* an invader here. The enemy."

"You're one too," William said with disgust.

"She's not one of us, you halfwit," Akua sneered. "She doesn't have the will or the blood."

It was refreshing to be in a situation where my opponents actually hated each other more than they hated me. Heiress was in the full swing of her gloat and the Lone Swordsman has his heroic shackles all raised, especially now that it was out in the open that Akua had screwed with an angel's corpse. Which he finally seemed to remember then and there. Keeping a wary eye on me, William moved towards Heiress. Who was too busy watching me from the corner of her eye to really do anything about it. I grinned. The Lone Swordsman raised his sword and Heiress backed away, preparing to cast.

"What did you do?" Akua said suddenly, looking at me.

"I have three things," I said. "A kingdom, an enemy and a claim."

William snorted.

"A claim?" he said. "You-"

"I am the heiress to the King of Callow," I interrupted calmly.

"There is no King of Callow," the Lone Swordsman said.

"Yet a man rules it, and I am his chosen successor," I said.

Akua flinched, then looked at the sword. Too late now: she'd already given me what I needed. Of her own free will, too. That had to sting. William took the opening to dart for the blade, wrapping his fingers around the hilt and tugging it out. It did not move. His eyes turned to me, scared for the first time since I'd met him.

"It isn't yours anymore," I said.

"It was granted to me by the Hashmallim," he said.

"It's a sword in a stone. You did that yourself, with no one forcing you," I smiled. "It's a symbol, now, in a story about Callow."

"She's an orphan," Heiress said quietly, aghast as the situation sunk in. "She's the *Squire*."

"Would you kindly get your hands off my sword, William?" I said.

They didn't even need to share a glance before they both turned on me. Wasn't *that* going to be a fun ride? The Lone Swordsman was so fast on the move he almost blurred to my Name sight, even damnably faster than when we'd gone for our last round. This

time, though, he wasn't predestined to win. That made a difference. I stepped around his blow but ate Heiress' spell right in the face: some kind of dark shroud that stuck around my eyes. I flared my Name, clearing it up some, but it was hard to make out William's sword as he swung again. I took the hit to the shoulder, at this point utterly indifferent to the fact that it bit through steel and into my flesh.

"Still dead," I reminded him, forming a burst of darkness around my hand and slamming it into his chest.

He went flying and I ran for the sword. The floor under my feet turned liquid but I leapt and landed in a roll just in time to get hit by a bolt of lightning. I was getting *really* sick of that spell, I thought as my muscles twitched uncontrollably. Was I smoking? I couldn't really smell anymore, so it was hard to tell. William's boot hit my back and I was sent sprawling but he'd made a mistake: I fell forward, and Heiress' next spell hit him instead. He yelled in dismay as a swarm of something sounding like bees gathered around him and I took my fraction of an opening, falling belly first right in front of the altar. Heiress cursed, then actually tried to curse me, but I grinned in triumph and my fingers closed around the hilt of that fucking sword people kept trying to kill me with. Gods, it burned even through the gauntlets. There was a heartbeat of pure pain and then it felt like I'd just gotten a brightstick to the face. There was warmth, and everything went white.

I was standing alone in a featureless plain. Not, not alone. Something was looking at me. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it – the weight of its stare. I looked down at my hands, noticing I was without armour. *My clothes from the orphanage, huh.* They looked less rumpled than usual, too. Apparently the Heavens did not approve of my sloppy laundry habits. I put a finger on my bare wrist and frowned when I felt no pulse.

"I beat you fair and square, your presumptuous fucks," I called out. "Cough up my resurrection."

The weight turned from noticeable to crushing in a heartbeat, forcing me to the ground. I could feel my bones grind into dust as my back snapped. They were looking at me. There was... where my Name should be, there was only fire. Something scouring me from the inside.

Repent. Repent. Repent.

The images passed through my mind as if I was still standing there. Black, offering me a knife in a dark room. Two men against the wall, bound and with terror on their eyes. Blood on the floor.

Repent. Repent. Repent.

The empty banquet hall in Laure, where Mazus' death was dispensed with a single sentence. The monster offering me a deal with smiling eyes. Agreement, followed by a sword through my chest.

Repent. Repent. Repent.

So many things. Sparing William, sacrificing thousands for my ambition. The innkeeper's daughter, swinging on the gallows. Breaking a man for supplies in Ater. Ordering those men dead in the cells at Summerholm, on suspicion alone. Leashing the Gallowborne with the threat of destruction. The dead, oh so many dead. Three Hills. Nilin, the traitor, my friend. All those I'd failed against the devils in the night. Marchford. Hunter, who'd fought and died for strangers. The people of Liesse, at the mercy of devils because I hadn't seen the betrayal coming. The light going out of Baroness Dormer's eyes as she surrendered.

Repent. You will not be forgiven. Repent.

I saw things that had not happened, now. Yet. Rising alive from the altar, a crown of light on my brow. Heiress dead at my feet. The Swordsman, kneeling. My red right hand. Liesse rebelling, weapons taken out of hidden cellars, exhumed from hidden stashes. A host sweeping across the south, ranks swelling as cities revolted one after another. Taking back the Blessed Isle, burnt-out towers remade in marble. Breaking the nine gates of Ater and pulling down the Tower on my enemies.

Repent, Queen of Callow.

I gurgled out a wretched laugh. *You can't ever lose, can you? Even when you're beaten I have to become one of yours.* I forced myself to remember something else. They tried to struggle but it was just as much a part of me as the rest had been. *You don't get to pick and choose what I am.* Two silhouettes cloaked in black, standing alone in front of the throne.

We do not kneel.

It wasn't enough. Those were not my words. I had borrowed them, and in borrowing lessened them. They demanded contrition. They demanded justification, for all my many sins. I had none. I clawed desperately into the depths of myself. Looking for something, anything. What I found... was a starry sky, in ruins that moaned in the wind. A dark-skinned girl, tempting me with a way out. Four dead on the floor as she fled. A lesson learned, a question answered.

Justification only matters to the just.

They flinched.

"I swore it," I croaked. "Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation."

I no longer saw a crown on my brow. They hadn't liked that at all, had they? So much for being Queen. The fires withdrew, leaving me empty. Still dead. Unlike their trap of a Name, this I took umbrage to.

"You can't cheat me," I laughed. "You're not the Gods. You're part of the story too. *You have to follow the rules.*"

I opened my eyes, looking up into the perfect blankness.

"And if you won't give me my due," I said. "I'll **Take** it."

They shrieked but the power flowed into me. I felt my body spasm. My heart beat. My blood flow. The plain blurred, collapsed into me as I laughed.

I was standing in the chapel again, the Lone Swordsman's sword through my belly. William's green eyes stared into mine, my hand on his shoulder as I used him to stay up. It was a strangely intimate pose.

"What is this, Squire?" he whispered.

I ripped out the thing inside of him, took it for my own. His skin turned paler, his face bloodless.

"*Rise,*" I replied.

Shadow spread across my body in thick chords. Healing me, pushing his blade out of my flesh. I could feel my heart beat and it was *glorious*. All the little things I hadn't realized were gone, now returned to me. The sword was still in my hand, the blade that has once been his. I rammed it into his neck, biting deep as he fell twitching to the ground. My boot rose once, twice, thrice. The skull gave the third time, breaking like an overripe fruit. My gaze swept across the room, finally falling on Heiress.

"I believe," I said, "that we were having a conversation about power. By all means, finish your thought."

Chapter 48: Threes

"Nothing is half as dangerous to a villain as victory. We raise our own gallows."

-Dread Empress Maleficent the First

"You're still a villain," Heiress said. "You're still the Squire."

Maybe, but things were... different now. I'd gotten an aspect much faster than I should have. *Take*. I could feel the now-shaped bundle of power inside of me, but there were complexities to it. It held the aspect I'd stolen from the Lone Swordsman, his godsdamned healing trick that had seen him survive the most brutal beating I'd ever dealt out. *Rise*. It was mine, now, but the way it was was hard to explain. I'd stolen the shape, maybe, but not the essence: there would only be so many times I could use it before it faded. When it did, though, I would be able to *Take* again. Or so I believed. My ignorance on the subject of Names and Roles was starting to be galling, but unfortunately there was no such thing as a how-to book to being a villain – the closest thing to that was my dreams, which tended to focus more on attitudes than practical knowledge. The dreams were, I thought, a teaching tool. A way to learn from the mistakes and victories of your predecessor. I wondered if Akua got them too, memories from the Heir that my teacher had killed.

"And yet, you are alive," Heiress said quietly. "That should not be possible."

I smiled cheerfully.

"Angels are sore losers, but rules are rules," I said.

I could not be dead and win. I had won, so I must be alive. As the true owners of the sword, the Hashmallim had been supposed to see to that. They'd tried to flip it around by making me a heroic Queen of Callow, but I wouldn't be having any of that. I already had a way and it was finally working: I wasn't going to turn my cloak this deep in the game. That they'd thought I'd willingly slaughter the Fifteenth as the first step in a kingdom-wide rebellion showed how little angels actually understood human nature. Those legionaries were mine, after all. Bastards to a man and entirely too lippy, but they were *my* bastards. They flew my banner, fought my battles and sang my songs. I would have been twice the traitor some called me to turn my back on them. I'd been called quite a few things in my life – the majority of them pretty unpleasant, because Creation was out to get me – but contrite had never been one of them. I owned all of me, even the parts that weren't pretty to look at.

For someone who was about to meet her makers, Akua seemed entirely too at ease. I felt flush with power right now, but that still rang alarm bells. Obviously, she had something up her sleeve. Didn't she always? Not for the first time, I wondered what Heiress' aspects actually were. I wouldn't be surprised if there was one entirely dedicated to screwing me over, though how that would be phrased into an imperative I wasn't sure. Clearly, at some point in this fight I'd stepped into her "clever" web of schemes. I should, I knew, probably spend some thought trying to figure out exactly how I'd done that. On the other hand, I

believed it was a safe assumption that my ripping off her arms and beating her to death with them wouldn't be part of any of her plans. It would also be *extremely* cathartic for me, which was an added bonus. I frowned. Was it actually possible to beat someone to death with an arm? Well, it couldn't be too different than doing it with a fish. So probably. *Only one way to find out.*

"So this has been an oddly civil talk," I said. "Let's fix that, shall we?"

"If you insist," the dark-skinned girl said.

Runes formed in the air around her hand and lit up. Nothing happened. She didn't hide her dismay quite fast enough for me not to notice it.

"Tried the demon, huh?" I said.

"You did something to prevent my access," she accused.

"That'd be the redhead, actually," I said. "And she's *definitely* earned a treat for that."

Akua sighed. "Well, it seems we've established killing you is likely beyond me at the moment."

"You say the nicest things," I said.

I strode forward with the angel sword in hand. It wasn't burning me anymore, but I wasn't feeling power from it either. It was, by all appearances, just a very sharp sword. Probably for the best. I'd been taught some very specific things about magical weapons anyway. There was a reason I didn't wield any when the Tower held the largest stash of magical artefacts on the continent: the way Black told it, relying on a magic sword – or a magic anything, really – was effectively signing your own death warrant if you were Named. They always failed you at the worst possible moment. Considering I'd just killed the Lone Swordsman with his own fancy angel sword, I was beginning to see his point.

"As it happens," Heiress said, "you can't kill me either."

"They all say that," I mused. "But you'll notice I have bits of hero all over my boots. Hopefully it doesn't stain, Hakram would have a bitch of a time getting that out."

"I mean, Squire, that should you kill me you'll not survive the act," Heiress said flatly. "I've bound this dimension to my life. Should I die, it will immediately collapse."

I squinted at her.

"Are you telling me you just tried to summon a demon of Corruption in a dimension you bound to yourself? That'd be a special brand of crazy even for you."

I cleared my throat.

"And by crazy I mean stupid. So very, very stupid."

Akua looked a little insulted at that and I could see her gearing up for scathing rebuttal, but she mastered herself at the last moment. Clearly those years getting under the skin of my opponents in the Pit were still seeing good use even though I'd found other employment.

"I could show you the runes proving this if you weren't magically illiterate," she said.

"That's slander," I said. "I'm *functionally* magically illiterate. There's an important distinction there."

My absolute refusal to take her sinister revelations seriously was riling her up, by the looks of the colour on her cheeks. I was rather enjoying that, truth be told. Whether she was actually telling the truth was a toss up, in my opinion. A contingency like this was right up her alley, but on the other hand I got the impression I'd already murdered my way through most of her contingencies. It might not matter if she was telling the truth, though. Given enough time, Masego was bound to find a way into this place. The moment he opened a way out, I could just smoke her and bail. Maybe toss a couple of goblinfire balls to make sure no eldritch abomination crawled out.

"I guess we could stand in our respective corners of the church and think that over," I said.

She smiled condescendingly.

"Apprentice will not find the gate to this place," she said.

"'cause you're such a big bad witch?" I said sceptically. "I suppose you might manage to hide it with a spell. On the other hand, it'd be pretty hard to do that without limbs. Which brings us back to the original plan of beating your ass. Progress, eh?"

"This dimension was crafted by Triumphant herself, you cretin," Akua said. "Not even the Warlock could find it."

"Harsh words," I said, rolling my eyes. "Alas, you've hurt my feelings. Negotiations are breaking down already."

"Do you have no self-preservation instinct at all, you fool?" she hissed.

I snorted.

"Akua, my opening gambit for this battle was *getting myself killed*," I reminded her patiently. "You're barking up the wrong tree here. But sure, I'll take this seriously. If you apologize for your impolite language."

I grinned.

"It was, I'm sure you'll agree, beneath the dignity of such an august personage as yourself."

I hadn't seen anyone wanting to murder me so badly in a while. Page, maybe, but even her glares hadn't been quite so venomous. I was morbidly curious about whether or not sheer anger might give Heiress heart palpitations.

"My words were not helpful to this conversation," she conceded through gritted teeth.

I could have made something of that but there was only so much taunting she'd take before lashing out. She had an offer to make, clearly, and at the moment she was my only way out of this dump. I could always run her through the moment we were back in Creation, though I suspected it wouldn't be that easy.

"I'll allow it, in the spirit of good will and cooperation," I lied. "Now spit out your bargain."

The Soninke straightened, painting solemn haughtiness on her face. It was actually a good look on her, but then she'd always been gorgeous. Shame about that whole thing where I was going to kill her or die trying, but she shouldn't have picked this fight if she didn't want to get stabbed repeatedly.

"In exchange for safe passage, I ask three concessions of you," she said.

"No," I said immediately.

Her eyes flashed with anger. "This is not how negotiations are done," she said.

"It is, if you're buying contraband painkillers in the alley behind an illegal fighting pit," I said.

I was being wilfully obstructive here, but not because I felt like being ornery. ... Not *just* because I felt like being ornery. When it came down to it she'd had training in this and I hadn't. The only way I wasn't going to get robbed was by making her so furious she got sloppy.

"Three for three, or we're done," I said. "We can find out the hard way whether your little Triumphant bubble really can't be found by Masego. Resourceful man, Apprentice. I'll take those odds."

Akua looked like I'd just flipped the negotiation table over her head and made her clean up the mess, but she swallowed her anger. She didn't have nearly as much of an upper hand here as she pretending she did, we both knew that.

"Three for three," she conceded. "In exchange for safe passage for you into Creation, you will refrain from killing me or spilling my blood for three days and three nights."

Ah, and there it was. The way she'd try to wiggle out of this mess. She'd bail out of Callow and return to the Wasteland, where the only way for me to kill her would be starting a civil war in Praes. That wasn't nearly as hardy of a shield as she thought it was, but it was still an obstacle. I remained silent, trying to go through my options. I could just tell her to die in a fire and bet everything on Masego pulling through against all odds, but I didn't like the shape of it. Crawling away from trouble she'd raised was what Heiress excelled at most. I'd already told Black more than once that for the shit she'd pulled her head should be on a pike, but the Empire had given her a suspicious amount of leeway. Either Black and Malicia were idiots, which I knew they weren't, or there was something else at play. I'd never seen the Heir in one of my Name dreams so I couldn't be sure, but avoiding blame might be one of the central powers for that Role. I'd already put my own slant on the events that unfolded today, so there would be no screwing my opponents with that story twice. Three days and three nights wasn't that long, anyway. It wouldn't get her out of southern Callow even if she managed to get her hands on a horse – which I'd make damned sure she wouldn't, even if I had to kill every mount in the city. If she was on foot, I could have three cohorts shadow her and wait out the time before they carpeted wherever she stood with munitions.

"Fine," I finally said. "Second?"

"Your monstrous little goblin seized my associates," she said, and my heartbeat stilled. "I want them released into my custody and the terms of the first concession applied to them."

Shit. She'd noticed it, then. Robber had spent the entire battle marauding in the streets with his cohort, capturing her Praesi lordlings. Did she know what I wanted them for? I couldn't just give them away, not before my gambit played out. I closed my eyes. *No killing or spilling of blood*, I remembered. Those were the terms. There were ways around that. Not pretty ones, but she'd pushed me a lot further down the ruthless side of the slope than she thought. She'd asked for two things, though, even if she'd tried to phrase it as one. That felt... significant. Usable.

"Pick three," I said.

She's had five people in her retinue at the beginning of the battle. Barika, who I'd executed before the battle began

properly. Fadila, the mage who'd bailed her out of the first three-way melee with the Lone Swordsman. And then there were the other three. Ghassan something or other, the boy with the sword I'd shamed in front of the court in Ater. Apparently a Taghreb lord in his own right. Then the actual important ones, the heir to the High Lordship of Aksum and the heiress to the High Ladyship of Nok. Akua's face went blank, her eyes considering. I'd taken her by surprised with that.

"Is Barika still alive?" she asked.

I smiled unpleasantly.

"Going sentimental on me, Heiress? Could be she is. Could be she isn't."

"If she is dead," the Soninke said softly, "there will be a reckoning for it."

"Oh, there'll be one of those anyway," I said with my friendliest expression. "You can count on that."

Her face smoothing out into an unnaturally calm expression, Heiress composed herself.

"Fasili Mirembé, Hawulti Sahel and Ghassan Enazah," she said.

The two high nobles and the failed military commander. Picking her minions based on political influence instead of competence, huh. Sloppy habit. It would cost her in the long run, if she lived that long.

"Sold," I shrugged. "In exchange, you will extend the truce terms given to you to all under my command."

"Agreed," she said, sounding slightly miffed.

Yeah, I'd seen that one coming a mile away. If I couldn't nail her at will, I was allowing a mage able to use High Arcana – whatever the Hells that actually was – to run rampant in a city full of my subordinates. She could have slaughtered her way through my entire high command and I wouldn't have been able to lift a finger to help.

"Third?" I said.

She was picking her words very carefully, which I took to mean she was about to try to pull a fast one. I was wrong, as it turned out. She was just being ridiculously audacious.

"After the war, I will petition to be granted governorship of Liesse," she said. "You will support this petition in court."

I blinked and then almost laughed, but she was being absolutely serious. The “no, Gods no, are you even serious, I didn’t hit you on the head nearly that hard” was halfway to being spoken when I paused. She didn’t know what I’d taken her minions for, I realized. Otherwise she wouldn’t have angled for this. I had actually managed to put together a plan she *hadn’t seen coming*. I forced my face to be completely blank. It would be suspicious as all Hells, but not as suspicious as my starting to smirk. Heiress as governess of Liesse had... possibilities. For one, she didn’t have to *stay* the governess. And while she was, she would be stuck in Callow. On my playing field instead of hers, away from all her allies and surrounded by a population that would utterly hate her guts. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. I would be surrendering the population of Liesse to the very woman who’d set a host of devils on them. *But I’ll have a whole arsenal of tools to make sure she behaves*. My own support wouldn’t guarantee she got the post, I told myself, but I knew deep down that she wouldn’t have asked for it unless she thought it would tip the balance in her favour. I had thought, perhaps naively, that after starting a war to get in a position of power I’d have sacrificed enough of my people to the altar of necessity. It seemed not. Part of me balked at the notion, but the rest had already decided it would be done. It was just a matter of deciding what I’d get in return.

I could get the names of all the spies in the Fifteenth. That was horribly, horribly tempting. There were problems with that, though. There could be others like Nilin – and my fingers clenched just at the memory of him – who’d been placed in the College by nobles years ago, and not all of them would be known to Akua. I suspected all the Truebloods shared their information with Heiress, but they likely didn’t share their sources. I wouldn’t be cleaning house entirely. And it wouldn’t stop her from placing fresh agents afterwards, anyway. The Fifteenth was going to be recruiting after all this, so it wasn’t like she’d lack opportunity. Could I ask for an unspecified favour? No, she wouldn’t go for that. It would give me too large of an advantage over her. I needed to strip away from her a tool she’d be able to use against me in the future. I tried to figure out a way to cut her off from Trueblood support, but the phrasing would be too tricky. There’d be ways around it. What did she have that I didn’t? Fancy armour. Curves. A magic sword. A *demon*.

“Agreed,” I said. “You’ll surrender the standard controlling your demon to Apprentice before a bell has passed.”

I paused.

“With the same demon still bound to it,” I added hastily.

She’d been about to accept the terms when I spoke, and looked irked when I added the last part. Close shave.

"Agreed," she replied.

The terms were set. Getting actual oaths going proved a little more complicated. Heiress suggested we swear on our Names, but I wasn't doing anything of the sort when she outstripped me in Name lore by such a wide margin. I proposed we swear on the Gods, but from the way she paled at that an oath to the Gods Below was a lot more dangerous than one to the Gods Above. We ended up compromising with a blood oath. She cut her palm, which was apparently tradition but unlike her I actually used my hands to swing a sword so I nicked my shoulder instead. I refused to mix our blood to seal the pact, citing the fact that her stupidity might be catching. I was actually more worried about her being crazy enough to put poison in her own blood or some sort of magical plague, but I wasn't about to admit that. It wasn't paranoia if you were dealing with Praesi. I cut off a bit of the Lone Swordsman's coat and we both dripped blood on the leather – myself first, just in case – which was apparently enough. I felt something like a manacle form around my hand, though there was nothing visible.

It was a novelty watching Heiress cast a spell that wasn't actively meant to harm me. She carved out a gate of light out on the shore and stepped through first when I invited her. I followed almost immediately, not willing to remain on that creepy island any longer than I had to. Her transition through was a lot smoother than Masego's had been, and I found myself on the shores of the Hengest just by the spot where the boat from earlier had finally finished burning. Heiress stood with her hands raised, surrounded by the Gallowborne with all their weapons out. Adjutant was the first to see me cross, and he told Apprentice to stand down.

"Catherine," Hakram said, looking relieved.

"Just a moment," I said, and sucker punched Akua in the stomach.

She let out a wheeze: I'd put my Name to work in that strike, and her armour bent under the impact. Sorcery crackled to life around her hand but I punched her in the stomach again and it winked out as she fell to her knees. Calmly, I took her wrist and snapped it.

"You probably thought I forgot to bargain for my own safety," I said. "I didn't. I just knew it wouldn't matter."

"You can't hurt me," she gasped.

"I can't kill you," I corrected. "Or spill your blood."

My boot came down and shattered her knee as punctuation. She screamed.

"Did you actually think you'd bargain your way out of this?" I said. "No. Not after what you did."

I smiled coldly.

"What was it you called me, when you sat down with Black in Summerholm? A nobody, I think. With a reputation as a brawler and nothing else to my name. Here's the thing, though, about brawlers."

I broke her other wrist, interrupting her second attempt to cast.

"We know how to hurt people without making them bleed," I said casually.

Under the gaze of a hundred Callowans and two other Named, I methodically broke every bone in Heiress' body I could smash without making her bleed. She'd heal all of this, eventually. But she'd be incapable of being a problem for me for at least a month. Her face remained intact – hits there bled too easily – but by the time I was done with her she could no longer move on her own.

"Now let's find out how well you bargained," I muttered.

I thought about breaking her bones repeatedly for three days and three nights, keeping her in the city until the truce ran out. The shackle around my hand tightened. Not that, then. I thought about allowing her to leave but having soldiers follow her. The shackle tightened again. The Fifteenth counted as an extension of myself for the purpose of killing, then. Damn. Dropping her in the lake? Also a break of the oath. I couldn't think of anything else at the moment, but I had a whole cadre of senior officers to run it by. As well as a man who'd been raised by a villain.

"Looks like you get to survive," I said. "For now, anyway. Captain Farrier?"

"Ma'am?" the Callowan replied, sounding a little awed.

"Have this woman dragged to the Fifteenth's headquarters in the city. No need to be gentle about it, but make sure she doesn't bleed."

He saluted. Letting out a long breath, I turned to Hakram and Masego.

"Come on, boys," I said. "We can talk as we walk there. The day's not quite done."

—

Juniper had claimed a guild hall as her forward command centre, as she'd done in Marchford. I could see why she'd pick up the

habit: they were usually the largest building in a Callowan city that wasn't a church or a noble's home. They were usually closer to the main avenues than those two as well, since they saw so much people come and go. After assuring the Hellhound that the angel situation was dealt with and that I'd give her a full report later, I managed to extract myself from that conversation and steal away Aisha from her. I'd need her for the coming conversation. The storage room where Robber had dropped off Heiress' minions had been cleared out except for four tightly bound rolls of angry Praesi, who started making noise through their gags the moment I strolled in. The Gallowborne propped up Heiress against a wall before I dismissed them, keeping only Apprentice and Aisha at my side. I crouched by two of the captives and took off their gags, ignoring the immediate indignant demands they bellowed.

"Do you even know who I am, you ignorant mudfoot?" the Soninke boy demanded.

I scratched my cheek. "I actually forgot your name," I admitted. "Aisha?"

The delicate-looking Taghreb looked halfway between despair and amusement.

"Fasili Mirembé," she provided. "Heir to Aksum."

"See, I know who you are now Babili," I told him. "Note how you're still bound. This is not, in fact, an accident."

"You can't kill them," Heiress croaked out from her corner.

"Look who's back from the land of dreams," I said. "And you're kind of right, I suppose. For three of them anyway. Sorry, Fadila, but you didn't make the cut. Your boss decided you were too low on the priority list."

I unsheathed my knife. The dark-skinned mage's eyes widened in panic.

"Wait," she said, "I-"

The point of my knife rested against her throat, not quite strongly enough to draw blood.

"Yes?" I said.

"I'll leave, go to the Free Cities," she said. "Never return to the Empire."

The other nobles in the room watched in utter silence, even Aisha.

"I'm sorry," I said, not unkindly. "But you're complicit in mass murder and a loose end besides. Exile isn't an option, here. Not with the kind of games the lot of you have been playing."

"Catherine," Apprentice said. "It would be a waste. I've told you before, she's one of the most talented practitioners of her generation."

"That makes her a very *bad* loose end, Masego," I said. "The kind that comes back to bite us in the ass at a critical moment."

"Grant me custody of her," he said. "I have projects that could use an additional pair of hands."

I frowned.

"You'd be responsible for her, and Black might object," I said.

The bespectacled mage snorted. "Let me handle Uncle Amadeus. As for responsibility, I intend to ask for some very specifically worded oaths."

I eyed Fadila dubiously.

"How about it?" I said. "Lab assistant or early grave? It's up to you."

"Thank you, Lord Apprentice," she said in a trembling voice, ignoring me and trying to sketch a bow while tied up. "I will not forget this."

I called the Gallowborne standing guard back into the room and had her dragged out. We could settle the details of that affair later.

"If that little display was meant to intimidate us, you have failed," the bound Soninke girl said.

I cast a look at Aisha. *Hawulti Sahel*, she mouthed silently. *Heiress to Nok*.

"Oh, Sawuti," I said. "If you're not scared, you're not paying attention. I can't kill you or bleed you, sure. But Apprentice could, say, rot off your eyes. He did it to the Bumbling Conjurer's face in Summerholm. Nasty as all Hells to look at, let me tell you."

They stiffened.

"Good news," I said. "That's not what we'll do. Apprentice, you have the tools?"

The chubby mage unrolled a pack of leather full of what looked like scalpels and pincers as well as a few objects clearly meant

to poke holes. They would have looked like a cutter's kit – or a torturer's – if not for the runes covering every nook and cranny of them. Hawulti let out a whimper.

"Mage, are you?" I said. "For the benefit of all you fellow ignorant bastards, those are tools used to extract and bind a soul."

The terror in the room was now palpable.

"See," I continued, "Heiress made the mistake of bargaining only for the safety of your bodies. I'm not going to touch those. Tricky things, oaths. But if I return empty husks to the Wasteland, well, I'll technically have respected the terms."

"You don't have it in you," Heiress said from her corner.

"A year ago, you might have been right," I agreed. "That was before you started fucking around with demons and feeding civilians to devils. You escalated, Akua. We're not playing around with war games anymore."

"You'd start a civil war," Fasili said. "Touch one hair from our heads and half the Wasteland will rebel."

"You know," I sighed, "I'm getting rather sick of this whole 'you can't touch' me complex Praesi nobles have. You seem under the impression it gives you free rein to do whatever you please without consequence."

They genuinely didn't understand me, I saw. Consequences, for them, was what happened when another noble outmanoeuvred them. Maybe when they fell for one of the Empress' own schemes. The idea that they might have to answer to a Callowan in dire need of a bath and twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep was completely foreign to their way of thinking. I might as well have been speaking in tongues.

"I'm not going to waste time on the lot of you," I said. "You're not who I want to talk to."

Masego put the scrying bowl on the ground while I put the gag back on Ghassan, and I saw the realization dawn in Heiress' eyes even through the pain. She'd dropped the ball a few times today, but she wasn't an idiot. The point had never been to end her minions. It was to blackmail their parents, the ones with the real power. Apprentice claimed a drop of saliva from the two high nobles, mixing it with the water in the implement. He whispered an incantation and the water turned to steam, hanging in the air like a sheet of parchment. It took a while for the connection to be made, but eventually the steam formed two images: a pair of faces looked back at me, surprised and furious. I glanced at Aisha.

"High Lord Dakarai of Nok," she said, inclining her head to the left, then to the right. "High Lady Abreha of Aksum."

The High Lord of Nok was a handsome Soninke in the prime of his life, a thin greenish scar running through an eye and lending him a dangerous edge. The High Lady of Aksum looked to be a hundred, dark skin wrinkled like a goblin's. She must have been prodigiously old for that to be the case, since Praesi dabbled in rituals to keep their appearance young long past what Creation had intended.

"Good evening," I said. "I am-"

"The Squire," the old woman said. "I see you have Fasili in your custody. This should be interesting."

"You'll be releasing my daughter immediately," High Lord Dakarai said. "If you want to survive the coming fortnight, anyway."

"Father," said daughter broke in, "she's gone mad, she-"

"Shut up," I Spoke.

Her mouth snapped shut. The other prisoner got the message.

"I dislike repeating myself," High Lord Dakarai said, tone flat.

"We have that in common then," I said. "This isn't a courtesy call, as it happens. I'm going to blackmail you."

There was a moment of silence and I heard Aisha sigh deeply.

"That was refreshingly direct," High Lady Abreha mused. "I'll grant you the same courtesy. No. Release my idiot nephew and I won't have everyone you love crucified."

"She can't kill them," Heiress said from her corner.

The eyes of both high nobles flicked to the side. Those two were old hands at Wasteland games, and so there was not so much as a flicker of emotion on their faces. High Lord Dakarai raised an eyebrow.

"Is that the Heiress?"

"She's having a bad day," I said. "It's about to get worse. She's correct, though, she bargained for the life of your successors. Unfortunately the bargain didn't cover their souls. What I'll do with those I'm not sure yet, but I've been meaning to get a girl jewellery and Nauk keeps telling me offering the remains of common enemies is 'an essential part of all courtships'."

Masego cleared his throat.

"They'll survive the extraction with few side effects," he said. "At least one of them should retain motor control, should the soul ever be returned."

"Isn't that Warlock's boy, trying to step into Father's shoes," Dakarai said without a speck of humour. "You should have advised your master better, Apprentice. There will be consequences to your actions today."

"My nephew is a mediocre bargaining piece, Squire," the High Lady Abreha said. "I have others. Some of them are even less annoying."

I didn't even glance at said nephew, though that must have been a little hard for him to hear.

"He's you acknowledged heir, though," I said. "I suppose you could name another one. Say I ripped out his soul, though, and later shoved it in another body. One in Black's hands. Your nephew would still have a claim, no? And a backer."

I smiled coldly.

"I imagine that might get a little messy for you."

That part of it was courtesy of Aisha, since I'd had no idea how Praesi inheritance worked. In short, anybody to ever have been acknowledged as the heir by the ruling lord or lady had a legitimate claim. Dying and rising as undead erased that claim – since those very angry undead High Lords lost a civil war, anyway – but neither of my prisoners would technically die at any point. The idea of an individual with a legitimate claim in the hands of my teacher, Aisha had explained, would have these two treading very carefully. Heiress wasn't the only one with a political stick to hit people with, and mine was really more of mace. One covered with spikes and with a noted distaste for the nobility.

"Your attempt at scare tactics are decent, if ultimately irrelevant," High Lord Dakarai said. "The Heiress might be fair game for you, but my daughter is not. Raise a hand to a member of the old blood and the Empire will rise in rebellion. You are trifling with forces beyond your reach, child. *Release my daughter.*"

I looked him calmly in the eyes, then laughed. Genuinely, honestly laughed. He was too confused to be offended, I thought.

"Gods, the lot of you. You keep saying there'll be a civil war if I do anything to one of yours, even if they try to kill me or my soldiers. Black and Malicia have gone soft on you, haven't they? They let you think that you're actually a threat."

I grinned nastily.

"Do it. Rebel. You think that would be a *defeat*, for me? Praesi nobility has been looting my homeland for *twenty fucking years*. Half of me is rooting for you to tell me to get bent just so I can take the Fifteenth back across the river and bury all of you in a mass grave. The Legions won't follow you, and the Legions are where the power is. And let's be honest, half of Callow will be trying to enrol so they can set your palaces on fire as payback for the Conquest."

I shrugged.

"I imagine the Empress will be cross with me, for a while," I said. "Black, though? Black might actually *smile* and if that doesn't scare the shit out of you I don't know what will."

I met their eyes, one after the other.

"How did that line go again? Ah, yes. *Tremble, oh ye mighty, for a new age is upon you.*"

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"I'll back whatever petition you're pushing," High Lady Abreha suddenly said. "I'll also withdraw my support from the petition on orc tribute, if you take his daughter's soul anyway."

"*Abreha, you treacherous bitch!*" the other noble thundered.

The old woman cackled.

"You were still suckling your ugly mother's teats when the Calamities came knocking, Dakarai. I was in the room when that line was last spoken. I told Tasia, I *told* her that Malicia would only tolerate so much. This is her hand, pulling the leash to remind us who rules."

I glanced at Aisha, but she shook her head.

"We need both, otherwise we don't have enough backing," she whispered.

Four of the the High Lords and Ladies, that was our target. There were only seven of them overall, so anything backed by the majority needed to be at least seriously considered by the Empress. The current balance of power in the Empire was skewed against the Empress: three of them were loyal to Malicia but four were part of the Truebloods. It was why they were giving her so much trouble at the moment. I'd been in talks with Black for over a month and he'd been serving as a go-between between myself and the Empress, first to sell the idea of a ruling council over Callow and then to get support from her allies. We'd gotten two out of the three, at the cost of guaranteeing a seat on the

council to a member of their family each. Now I needed to get my last two high nobles on board, and if the way to do that was threatening to rip out a few souls I was willing to have that on my conscience.

"I can't accept that deal at this point in time," I politely told High Lady Abreha.

She seemed unsurprised. High Lord Dakarai waspishly asked what exactly I wanted him to do and without wasting and more I told them. Another round of threats was exchanged, but with Aisha whispering more diplomacy in my ear I eventually got what I wanted. Oaths were given on both sides, the exact wording already prepared by Masego. When the scrying session ended, I was left feeling drained but thoroughly satisfied. Was that what actually pulling off a plan felt like? I kept expecting Creation to retaliate brutally at any moment, but for now it seemed like I'd gotten away with it. I cut the two high brats loose and informed them they were no longer my problem – the oaths I'd given would see them safely back to their seats of power. Which left Ghassan and Heiress. I looked at my rival and crouched in front of her.

"I have to let you go," I said. "It physically pains me to admit it, but you took care of that much."

Masego stood behind me, leaning against the wall.

"Apprentice had to rip out one of my aspects, at Marchford," I told her, and her eyes widened.

Exactly how much she'd screwed up began to sink in.

"When I planned all of this – and I did – I figured I'd just kill you. If I couldn't, I figured I'd even the scales the Callowan way. Your three aspects for the one I lost."

She managed a smirk, which was really an accomplishment considering how many of her bones were still broken.

"But your soul isn't actually in your body," Apprentice said. "The ritual you must have completed for that to be the case and your Name still somehow function is, well, the most brilliant piece of sorcery I've seen done in my lifetime."

He sounded genuinely admiring.

"So we can't touch you," I said. "You might be feeling a little smug about that, I suppose. Wiggling out again. It occurs to me, though, that the reason you never quite seem to understand that you shouldn't fuck with me is that you never lose anything, in our confrontations."

I met her eyes.

"I killed Barika," I said. "I put a crossbow bolt in her eye and had her body buried in sanctified grounds. She's not coming back, ever. And now we're going to sit together, you and I, to watch Apprentice rip out your minion's soul and bind it to a stone."

I met her eyes calmly.

"I'm not a monster, Akua. I'll destroy it when our truce is done, and let him go to the Underworld. But when you crawl away from this mess, when we're done, you'll remember this moment. What happens, when you set fire to my homelands for your little plots."

We sat. We watched. And when it was done, I leaned into her ear.

"If you do manage, somehow, to get the governorship? I'll be watching you. Waiting. And this time there will no bargaining to save you."

I got up and looked down on her.

"Now get the Hells out of my kingdom."

Chapter 49: Triumph

"There's a degree of argument among scholars as to whether the Liesse Rebellion was the underlying cause of the Uncivil Wars or the first of them. I was there, though, and I can tell you this: the seeds that were sown in Liesse are what we reaped in the years that followed."

– Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

I'd have thought they would do this in Whitestone, with all the sprawling avenues and gardens there to use, but I'd severely underestimated how many people would be there for the ceremony. Half the city must have been packed around Fairfax plaza, filling every nook and cranny Marketside. Merchants were selling chilled wine and ale as well as something that smelled like those spicy sausages from Hedges. I was more interested in the grilled fish on sticks from the lake, though watching some man obviously devoid of taste scarfing down one macerated in the Southpool way instead nearly put me off my appetite. Ratface had told me that in Praes the designated idiots in all the jokes were the people from Nok, but here in Callow it was the Southpooleans. Too much mud in their part of the Silver Lake, it clogged the brains. The old rumour that their people mated with giant carps was a fond a well-polished assertion in the rest of the country.

The Fifth Legion was out in force, today. They'd opened a cordon from the Green Gate to the plaza and kept it open by liberal use of clubs when the crowd got too enthusiastic. Which it had, much to my surprise. I'd been at the heart of the force that had ended

the Liesse Rebellion in fire and steel, but by the way people were cheering as I rode through the streets you'd think I'd restored the Kingdom. Some people actually threw flowers: bell lilies, the same blooms Eleanor Fairfax had once worn a crown of. A symbol of victory old as the Kingdom, now used to praise the girl who'd made sure that same Kingdom would not rise in her lifetime. The irony of that was cloying, and I would have told Hakram as much were he not three steps behind me to my left. Apprentice, to my right, had somehow gotten his hands on a chariot pulled by two pale silver winged horses.

I'd seen Warlock use a similar one back in Summerholm, running over the Lone Swordsman as his way of joining the fray. The horses were likely a pretty picture for the celebrants – they'd bring in mind the old tales about unicorns, now gone from Callow and into the Waning Woods – but from where I sat I could see the melded at the base of the wings. Clearly, those horses hadn't been *born* with wings. I supposed that I should count myself lucky they didn't breathe fire, like the flying pig had. Masego clearly had no idea how to actually guide a chariot, much to my amusement, but there seemed to be spells on the reins that did the work for him. Still, now and then his hand jerked out of his control and he tried very hard to pretend he'd meant to do that all along.

Behind us the Fifteenth filtered through the streets, the Gallowborne in front. The name had been officially sanctioned, and the paint on their shields depicting a golden noose was still fresh. The same emblem was on the banner Captain Farrier carried, gold on red with the embroidered motto they'd picked themselves: *best of the worst*. Robber already had several limerick couplets unflatteringly relating the words to their abilities in bed, which inevitably had spread like wildfire in my legion. Behind my personal guard, Juniper and her general staff were at the head of the column. The orc was looking unusually cheerful today, which more or less meant she wasn't actively scowling at anyone. I even knew why, since Black had passed one that bit before official word could come in: she was, today, to be made the youngest general since Reforms. Before those didn't count, in my opinion, since there'd been quite a few High Lords and Ladies barely into their teens granted that authority for political purposes. Marshal Grem One-Eye had only been granted the position officially in his twenties, though he'd ascended to the office of Marshal the same year. Still, she might yet beat that record too. There was always another war around the corner, and the old guard was beginning to be more old than guard.

I caught a handkerchief floating through the air, thrown from a balcony. The pretty blond girl who'd tossed it flushed deeply when I looked in her direction. Nice dress, I noted, and quite revealing. It was satin, so she was likely from lesser nobility or wealthy merchant class. I tucked it into one of the pockets

sown inside my cloak. It was still the same pitch-black garment Black had gifted me last year, but it had undergone... modifications. There were three strips of cloth bordering the bottom of it now. Taken from three banners: the Silver Spears', Marchford's and Liesse's. Hakram had procured and sown them himself on the march to Laure, since he was apparently a deft hand with a needle. I liked the effect, and it did not escape my attention he'd left room for many more stripes.

The procession was slow, but eventually we arrived to the plaza. I dismounted from Zombie the Second, who for now remained a living creature, and let a sigh of pleasure out at finally standing on my feet again. Adjutant and Apprentice flanked me as we waited for Juniper to join us, her perfectly polished armour reflecting the glare the noonday sun. The four of us stepped towards the platform ahead of us. There might have been wood under it, but it was out of sight: the entire structure was covered with a red woven carpet, the style of it Callowan if not the colour. The Empress had likely ordered it from Laure weavers to reinforce ties there. Malicia herself was seated on a throne, an ornate thing made almost entirely out of gold. The arms of it were shaped as lions holding bells in their mouth, a rather bold statement. Lions were a symbol associated with the throne of Praes, while bells had been the symbol of the Fairfax dynasty the Empress had overthrown.

Apparently the lions were a recent change, as it had been previously been tigers who'd served as the emblematic animal. They'd gone out of style after the sentient tiger army fiasco, Aisha had told me.

The Dread Empress was still absurdly beautiful, and I privately decided that having gotten a good look at her was half the reason the people of the city were cheering. The crown on her head was ivory inlaid with lapis-lazuli with a perfectly spherical sapphire as the centrepiece. Her dress was white bordered in thick braids of gold, revealing the beginning of her breasts and her bare shoulders. Splendid gold armbands with scenes of the Imperial civil war held from her upper arms and a heavy necklace shaped a dozen Towers linked circled her neck. None of it held a candle to Dread Empress Malicia in the fullness of her glory, sitting in the shade of her red pavilion. The four of us came to stand half a dozen steps down from her throne and stopped. She smiled, and the world felt like it had gone bright. Just a quirk of the lips, and I knew men would have killed their own siblings to get another one. They probably had.

Even Hakram was blushing, and I knew for a fact he found humans unattractive. Masego seemed a little surprised at himself for being affected at all, which made sense to me. I'd never seen him display any interest in anyone from either gender, and wasn't sure he had that in him at all. The Empress rose, and for the

first time I noticed that Black was standing to the right of her throne. He looked shabby, compared to Malicia. His plate was without ornament, his sword undecorated and his cloak looked almost threadbare. Until it caught the light, anyway, and then suddenly it looked like it was made entirely of crow feathers. It wasn't enough to make him look like anything but a sworn sword guarding his ruler. At my side Masego and the two orcs knelt as Malicia took a step forward.

I remained standing.

"Rise," the Empress ordered, and they obeyed.

Malicia's words reverberated across the entire plaza without her ever raising her voice and the silence that ensued was so absolute you could have heard a pin drop.

"Order has been restored to Callow," she said. "Procer's attempt to place a puppet on the throne has been thwarted, the misguided rebels of the south shown the errors of their ways."

Or a grave, for those who hadn't been nailed to a cross. So that was the angle she was going to take on this whole thing. Poor Callowans had been tricked by the wicked Procerans, made to bite the hand that fed them by bribery and coercion. The Empire would, of course, be merciful. But no so merciful as to spare the nobles who'd masterminded the rebellion.

"Laure remained loyal," Malicia said, her voice caressing the city's name in a way that almost gave me a shiver. "As did so many of our subjects. For this, there will be reward."

The anticipation in the plaza was palpable.

"All taxes in cities that remained loyal will be halved for a year," she announced. "And in this greatest of Callowan cities, I declare a week-long festival to honour our victory."

The crowd went wild. Halved taxes, huh. Good call. Trade had slowed when the blades came out and this would get it started again. As for flattering the ego of Laureans, it was hard to go wrong with that. I was honest enough to admit that the people of the city I'd been born in thought of themselves as the only part of Callow that really mattered. Apprentice looked bored out of his skull, but Hakram and Juniper were listening with sharp eyes. The Hellhound had already pressed me privately on the subject of what the Fifteenth would be doing in peace time, and the Empress' current focus on Callow was revealing. I knew my legion would be on assigned duty to a city, I just didn't know *which* one. Black had been even vaguer than usual, implying there were plans being hatched higher up in the ranks.

"Though I reward loyalty, I must also reward service," Malicia continued when the cheers died out. "Legate Juniper of the Red Moons, step forward."

The Hellhound did, and knelt when the Empress elegantly gesture for her to do so.

"For your resounding victories at Three Hills, Marchford and Liesse, I name you a general of the Empire. As of this moment, the Fifteenth Legion is granted full status as a Legion of Terror and the ensuing right of recruitment."

The cheers at that were more sporadic, though I got the impression the crowd would vocally approve of pretty much anything Malicia would say today. Greenskins still weren't popular in Callow, though in cities that was beginning to change as they spent time in garrison duty. Juniper remained kneeling.

"Lord Apprentice," the Empress said, after Masego also knelt. "For your distinguished service in the pursuit of peace, I grant you Imperial sanction to raise a mage's tower anywhere in the territories of the Empire."

The history behind that was a little more complicated. A mages' tower was essentially a fortified laboratory warded so heavily it would make a fortress flinch, and after having to put down a dozen rebellions springing from those the Tower had restricted their raising. The only person currently sanctioned to have one was Warlock, who had linked the three dozen laboratories he actually had through a pocket dimension to get around the technical restriction of one. Now Masego could raise one as well, and I knew where he would: Marchford. He'd already told me that after the ceremony he would be leaving the Fifteenth to go study the thinning of the borders between Arcadia and Creation where we'd fought the demon. He'd be missed, but I knew if I really needed him he'd come. We were friends. How odd, that I actually had those now.

"Hakram of the Howling Wolves," Malicia said. "I welcome you as the embodiment of the ties between the Clans and the Tower, the living proof that our people are united as they never have been before. You have served well and faithfully, proving the worth of your Name. For this I grant you all the attending the dignities of a lord of Praes."

But not, I noticed, the actual legal title. Black had been trying to push the recognition of clan chieftains as nobles in their own right for decades to no avail. The reasons for that involved the Clans not technically owning the steppes they lived in and the justifications behind the whole tribute system, which had apparently been even more of a clusterfuck before the Empress had reformed it. Still, this was not a meaningless gesture. Hakram could now own land, raise a retinue and would be tried in the

noble courts of Praes should he ever commit a crime. That last part was admittedly largely irrelevant as long as he served in the Legions, since he answered only to military tribunals while in service, but should he break the law as a civilian he might be the first greenskin ever taken to trial in the noble courts. He could technically style himself Lord Adjutant in public, now.

“And lastly, Catherine Foundling.”

The Empress dark eyes were on me, her red lips quirking fondly. It was a lie, that fondness. I’d done little to earn personal affection from the ruler of the Empire. And yet, looking at her smile, I almost wanted to believe in the lie. Some people could be dangerous without ever holding a blade. I barely noticed the crowd going quiet again behind me.

“Our Squire was born in this very city,” the Empress said, and there was a rumble of approval. “In Callow’s hour of need, she led soldiers from all parts of the Empire and scattered the forces of disorder.”

Only true if I counted as a Deoraithe, but it painted a pretty picture.

“For her valour, she now stands before me as the Lady of Marchford.”

For a moment I thought I’d gone deaf. The clamour from the crowd filled the sky, as they stomped the ground and screamed themselves hoarse. I met Malicia’s eyes and inclined my head, hiding my surprise. My mind was already spinning. What the people had heard was a no-name orphan becoming a noble, granted the rule over one of the oldest and richest holdings in Callow. A promise that the old nobility was dead, and under the rule of the Tower anyone could rise. What I’d heard, though, was different. The Empress had granted me a Praesi title, ruling over Callowan land. It was a statement. *We’re here to stay. No rebellion will ever sweep us out.* I closed my eyes and let the crowd’s approval wash over me. I’d have to think on this, on what it meant, before the day was out. But just for a moment, I allowed myself to enjoy it.

—

The suite in the Royal Palace was the same one I’d been given after becoming the Squire, though this time I was conscious when moving in. There would be festivities tonight and I’d need to change for them, so I took a bath in that same Miezian wonder I’d already sampled once. When I emerged scoured clean and smelling like lavender I dried myself, tying a towel around myself. I felt something more than heard it, and reached for the knife I’d left by the bath.

“That won’t be necessary,” Black’s amused voice informed me.

I sighed. One of these days, the two of us were going to sit down and have a nice talk about the wonders of knocking. I returned to the room to catch the familiar sight of my teacher lounging in a chair by a Proceran *bureau*. He was idly thumbing through a book of Kilian's, a treatise on fine elemental manipulation by Dread Emperor Sorcerous. I'd tried to read through it a few weeks back and emerged from the attempt more confused about how magic worked than when I'd started. Whatever the transitional phasing of energy was, it was fiendishly complicated. And also possibly not real? How something could simultaneously not exist and be considered a basis for spellcrafting was beyond me. I ignored my teacher and stepped behind a cloth screen to change into comfortable breeches and shirt. It wasn't that I was shy about my body, more that it felt... wrong to be naked around Black. Like pissing in a church. It had been bad enough seeing him make out with Ranger in a Name dream.

"So you've got bad news for me," I said as I emerged. "You're getting sadly predictable in your old age."

"I'm not even eighty yet," Black replied with a twitch of the lips.

Not that he looked a day older than twenty-five, unless you paid very close attention.

"You're correct, though," he said. "Sit down."

I leaned against the pillars of my enormously oversized bed instead.

"As the last appointment of the sort done directly by the Tower, Akua Sahelian was granted the governorship of Liesse," he said.

I blinked, started to speak then closed my mouth. I pushed myself off the wooden pillar and, very calmly, punched it so hard it splintered.

"That is *insane*," I said. "Is this because I sent the letter? I put all my recommendations that she get the post in quotes, Black. The only way I could have been clearer was to add a sentence afterwards going 'by the way, this is sarcasm, the only thing Heiress deserves is a summary execution'."

"Her bid had other backing," he said.

"Gods, if Malicia had waited another week the appointment would be put off her hands. The whole point of the ruling council is controlling the governorship system," I snarled. "I don't know what she's up to, Black, but people are going to be butchered."

"I am aware," he said quietly.

"This will cause unrest, mark my words," I said. "It's open knowledge she's the one who set the devils on the city. Gods Above, you're putting in charge of Liesse the same woman who saw over two thousand of its citizens fed to *literal* hellspawn."

The butcher's bill after the siege had been heavier than I'd thought it would be. The evacuation of civilians deeper into the city had not been complete, some people refusing to leave their homes even with an army knocking at the gate. Black did not reply. I stared at him until the fury began to wane. All I'd just said he already knew.

"This isn't your doing at all," I said.

"It is not."

My eyes sharpened.

"Malicia?"

He grimaced, and that was all the answer I needed.

"Why? She must have reasons," I said.

"I would assume so," he replied.

I sat down on the bed, my limbs feeling heavy. What he'd just said... Shit. That had *implications*. Black and Malicia had been thick as thieves since I'd first met them, and though I'd known there were some fractures there they'd always presented a united front. Disagreements were settled behind closed doors, where no one would hear – not even me. That my teacher was even willing to admit this was entirely the Empress' game meant he disagreed with the decision so much he was not willing to put up that façade for the conversation.

"Is she cutting you out?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"I will be getting answers on the subject when we return to Ater," he said. "She doesn't trust any defensive measures but the Tower's for this conversation."

There were only so many people who would have the guts to eavesdrop on a conversation between these two.

"The Truebloods are up to something," I guessed.

"You kicked a hornet's nest when you forced them to back your petition," Black said.

"You were along for the ride the whole time," I reminded him.

"I was not criticizing you," my teacher said, lips twitching.
"Quite the contrary."

I might still have to kill you, one day, I thought as my cheeks warmed. The longer I knew the man, the more complicated my relationship with him grew. I'd thought, when I first became the Squire, that I would have to fight him tooth and nail for every scrap of power. Instead he'd had my back every step of the way, battering down doors I couldn't open on my own. I loved him a little bit for that. For seeing something in me I'd always believed was there, but that no one else had ever acknowledged. I also hated him for it, because I could no longer think of him as the enemy. Warlock had said that one day I would have to make a choice, and I believed him. And when that day came, when the knife was in my hand, I knew that if I killed him I'd miss him. As a teacher, as a mentor, as perhaps the closest thing to a father figure I'd ever had.

He was the Black Knight, and I was the Squire.

"I'm your successor," I finally said.

"You are," he agreed.

"I've wondered why you have one of those at all," I said. "The Empress has a theory but I don't think it fits anymore. If it ever did."

Black rested his chin on the top of his hand, draped over his chair.

"I have been doing this for a very long time," he said.

"Villains live until they die," I said.

"Yes," he said softly. "Until they die. Over the length of my career, I have myself killed twenty-three heroes and heroines. I've orchestrated or otherwise ordered the death of easily thrice that."

He shrugged indifferently.

"I'll meet someone better, eventually. Or they'll get lucky: it only needs to happen once. It might be today, it might be next month, it might be decades from now – but they'll get me."

"So I'm your contingency?" I said.

"You've heard it, haven't you?" he asked instead of replying.
"The song."

My heartbeat stilled.

"The first step is hardest, they said to her

You will have to walk through fire-“

“It will burn away what you once were,

And always devour whole a liar,” I finished.

He smiled, and it was sharp as a knife.

“They will learn to *fear* you, Catherine. I hope I live long enough to see it.”

A shiver went through me as he rose to his feet. He knew the song. Gods Below, he knew the song. Two years that question of where I knew it from had plagued me.

“You’ve heard it before?” I asked.

“Once, when I was young,” he said. “It was not for me.”

“Where is it from?”

“It’s not from anywhere,” he said.

I frowned.

“What’s it called, then?”

“*The Girl Who Climbed The Tower*,” he told me, and left.

—

Masego’s rooms weren’t far from mine. I’d expected to find him alone there, but was pleased to discover he was talking with Kilian. They both rose when I came into the room.

“Cat,” Apprentice greeted me.

“My Lady of Marchford,” the redhead teased, curtsying.

I strode forward and swept her into my arms, dipping her into a long and deeply satisfying kiss. Gods, I’d missed spending time with Kilian. Eventually Masego cleared his throat and I released her. She was flushed and her eyes a little wide.

“Already taking advantage of the servants,” my lover sighed.

“Typical noble.”

“Don’t bother returning to the legion quarters tonight,” I said.

“I don’t think you’ll be using those much.”

“Your bed is much nicer than mine,” she conceded.

I threaded my fingers through hers.

"Somewhere in this godforsaken palace there must be a dress that fits me," I said. "It might even be in a colour other than black, one hopes. We'll go dancing tonight, at the festival."

"Dancing was not one of the Fae talents I inherited," Kilian said.

"Wear thick shoes," I recommended. "It's not one of mine either."

She smiled, cheeks dimpling as she brushed back a strand of hair behind my ear.

"I'll leave you two to it, then," she said. "Always a pleasure, Lord Apprentice."

Masego grimaced. "Gods, don't call me that. It makes me sound like I should know what's going on at court."

She waved us goodbye with a last smile and the door closed behind her. Masego's room were smaller than mine, I noticed amusedly, and already filled with a dozen pile of books. I could see what looked like a dead pig cut open in his bathtub, which was just so typically Apprentice I couldn't help but snort.

"We'll have to discuss where I'll build my tower," Masego said. "Sit?"

I sat on what appeared to be the sordid Proceran invention known as a pouf. It was particularly frilly, and couldn't decide whether it was a stool or a sofa. Praesi had it right with the cushions, I thought.

"We'll settle that when we get there, I think," I said. "Obviously I'd prefer if it wasn't in the middle of the city."

"The hills would be best," he said. "Where the demon was first contained."

And that was why I was here, wasn't it? Apprentice had claimed an actual chair and looked rather curious as to why I was here at all.

"Masego," I said. "Could you hand me the trinket I gave you? The one made of bone."

He frowned, then cocked his head to the side.

"Why? You've had no definitive proof I'm not corrupted."

I blinked. "Wait, you *knew*?"

He looked rather offended.

"You thought I *didn't*?" he said. "Catherine, it smells like goblin munitions. It has a piece of your Name in it."

"And you wore it anyway?" I said disbelievingly.

"Well, yes," he said slowly. "After being exposed to a demon it was necessary for me to have a kill switch in case Father's diagnostic spell has failed."

I was, honestly, at a loss for words.

"That's, uh, very enlightened of you," I said.

"It was a reasonable precaution," he said. "Arrangements like it aren't uncommon among villains. I know Uncle Amadeus has a way to kill Father should he ever be corrupted, and he himself has an arrangement with Assassin to be executed should he ever become a threat to the Empire."

He shrugged.

"Your method was crude and relatively obvious, but it would have been effective."

"I kind of feel bad, now," I mused. "I mean, I already did. But now I feel bad in a different, novel way."

"You *should*," Apprentice muttered. "Honestly, thinking I wouldn't notice. You might as well have written 'magical bomb' on the surface."

"I'm... sorry?" I ventured.

"I'll expect a more elegant method of disposal before we get to Marchford," he said. "As well as a written essay on the subject of why trying to deceive a man with my superb intellect is a fool's errand."

"I'm a villain now, I shouldn't have to do homework," I whined.

Both of us were smothering grins. Apparently I *could* do something right, once in a while. Not for lack of trying in the other direction.

—

This particular annex to the Royal Palace, called the Songbird's Cage, had been built by Eleanor Fairfax's grandson to house his mistress away from the prying eyes of his queen. He'd had the doors and windows barred and locked when said queen had started visiting the mistress more often than he did, spawning half a dozen songs running on the theme of caged doves, all of them involving puns about 'locks and keys' that thought themselves very clever. In later years, it had become where Callowan royalty

held prisoners that weren't officially prisoners. Several rebellious Dukes of Liesse had cooled their heels there until talk of secession died down, as had Fairfax uncles with a little too much ambition. It was fitting that the Baroness Dormer would be held there. A line of Gallowborne led by Captain Farrier trailed behind me as we tread the corridors, waving away the legionaries from the Fifth that guarded the unlocked door. My guards took position around the entrance – I'd expected a bit of friction there, but the two orcs from the Fifth began asking questions about Marchford instead.

Few of my legionaries had to pay for their own drinks, these days.

I knocked politely and waited until I was bid to enter from inside. I could have just strolled in, but it cost me nothing to be polite. If I ever ended up in her position, I hoped I would be extended the courtesy. Somehow, it was doubtful I would. Villains didn't get taken prisoner, as I understood it. We turned our cloak or died, there was no middle ground. I had a nice cloak now, though. Turning might damage it. I supposed I'd have to stick with the whole villain thing for now. Anne Kendal, the Baroness Dormer, was still stunningly beautiful even in the subdued garments of a prisoner. She'd been allowed to keep her personal wardrobe, by my order, save for armour and weapons. Sitting in the solar of her suite, by the window, she'd been reading a book in candlelight. It wasn't dark out yet but the windows were facing the wrong way to let the sun in properly.

"Lady Squire," she said. "I did not expect a visit for some days."

"There's been some new developments," I said. "May I sit?"

"By all means."

I took the comfortable armchair facing hers, then lightly slapped two scrolls on the table. One held the seal of the Legions of Terror, the other the Tower's.

"My trial is over," Baroness Kendal immediately grasped. "I wasn't even asked to stand in front of the judges."

Her smile turned bitter.

"So much for a fair trial."

"There would have been no point in you being there," I said flatly. "I stacked the tribunal."

Surprise and confusion flickered across the Baroness' face. She'd been taken prisoner by the Fifteenth when the city of Liesse was under martial law – it was in my power to decide she should be

tried under a military tribunal. I'd quietly sit down with the officers involved and told them what the verdict was going to be. There had been no debate.

"Open it," I said, pushing forward the scroll with the seal of the Legions.

She broke it open and her brow rose as she scanned the lines.

"I am not to be executed," she said.

"You've been stripped of your holdings," I said. "That much was a given. You may still call yourself a baroness, but not the Baroness Dormer. Doing so would qualify as unlawful claim to Imperial property, under Praesi law. I think the punishment for that is lashes? I skimmed the reading, to be honest."

"This," she said, "does not seem like the work of Praesi law."

"Things are changing," I said. "There's a reason I fought this war. Open the other one."

Steeling herself, the noblewoman broke the Tower's seal. Her eyes widened.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Before the week is over, the Empress will announce the creation of a ruling council over Callow," I said. "This is your appointment to a seat on it."

Seven members, there would be. Black had one, as the official head of the council – and also held the sole right of veto over any motion passed. One seat for the Empress' representative, two in the hands of the high nobles who'd backed me willingly. One for me, and two appointments left for me to choose. It would work through majority vote, and I'd own that. Black had already told me privately he'd only attend the first few sessions before officially passing his vote and right of veto into my hands. With two seats in Callowan hands, my own vote and my teacher's, I'd be effectively capable of passing any motion I wished. I'd agreed to Black being head of the council without any quibbling: I was not, at the moment, capable of ruling Callow. Especially not if I now had the rebuilding of Marchford to worry about as well. The council was a temporary measure meant to ease me into the trade ruling until I made a decision about the reorganization of Callowan territories.

"I'm a rebel," Baroness Kendal said.

"You *were* a rebel," I said. "Now you have a seat and vote in the institution that will pick the Imperial governors for all the

holdings that were confiscated in the rebellion – including your own. Congratulations, Baroness.”

“Who else will be in this... institution?” she asked faintly.

“Three Praesi yet to be determined, Black, myself and someone I’ve yet to choose. I’m considering picking someone from the House of Light, but I’ll need a priest that’s not a zealot. I was hoping for your help in finding one, actually.”

“So Praes still holds the leash,” she said. “Majority vote, is it?”

“I hold the leash,” I corrected. “There’s governors needed for Vale, Dormer and Holden. We’ll be choosing them. I don’t know about you, but I figure it’s time at least *some* Callowan land is governed by Callowans.”

“Not Liesse,” she said, clever eyes searching mine.

“Liesse is my problem to handle,” I said. “We’ll have authority to set laws and taxes for all of Callow – except maybe Daoine. The Duchess is already sending envoys to argue that since her duchy is a tributary state it doesn’t fall under the council’s authority.”

“Kegan was born grumpy and only got worse with the passing of years,” the silver-haired woman murmured. “Am I to understand that this council will have authority over all Imperial governors?”

I smiled coldly.

“That is correct,” I said. “It is within the scope of our mandate to remove governors and governesses should they prove unworthy of the authority they wield.”

Oh, there were quite a few laws specific to governors I was going to pass. First among them a rule forbidding any Callowan official from summoning or dealing with devils. Then another one limiting the amount of city guards allowed, as well as the founding of a group investigating corruption in the collection of taxes. Heiress might have her appointment for now, but she sure as Hells wasn’t going to *keep* it.

“The Empress has forged anew the crown of Callow,” the Baroness said. “No, she’s gone even further. The Fairfaxes could not dismiss nobles who displeased them at will. The powers you described are unheard of outside of the Free Cities.”

“Things are changing,” I repeated quietly. “You could refuse the appointment, of course. Head into exile.”

Black had told me that if she made that choice Assassin would dispose of her before she ever crossed the border.

"No," she said. "I rebelled because I saw a better path for Callow. What kind of a hypocrite would I be, if I left now?"

A dead one, I did not say. I rose to my feet, inclining my head respectfully before heading for the door.

"Lady Foundling?"

I paused, then turned to match her stare.

"Why me?" she asked.

"Because there was more to the Liesse Rebellion than the Lone Swordsman and Proceran gold," I said. "Because you weren't wrong, really. Just not strong enough to win."

Because I know I can bend you to my will if I need to, my mind whispered. I left the room and the noblewoman with it. The Gallowborne immediately broke out of conversation, falling behind me. Captain Farrier stood at my side as we strode away. We left the Songbird's Cage, and I strolled through a pleasant garden. Sunset was beginning. The birds in the trees already sang their songs, the silver fountain in front of me gurgling quietly. I stopped a moment to enjoy the quiet.

"Where to now, Countess?" Farrier asked.

I looked at him, at the calm blue eyes and the angular face. Not for the first time, I reflected he had the most Callowan face I'd ever seen. Malicia had made a statement, in front of the crowd. Named me Lady of Marchford. And now, in this quiet garden, John Farrier was making another one. Countess, he'd called me. Not Lady. *One of us or one of them.* I looked up to the reddening sky, my fingers clenching and then slowly unclenching.

I did not correct him.

Interlude: Precipitation

"Procerans have always been the villains in our plays, scheming Alamans and grasping Arlesites. Given our history this is understandable, my Strategos, but you and I know the truth of it. The Principate is the final line of defence between Calernia and Evil. Two millennia they have kept the Dead King on his shore of the northern lakes and even longer have they turned back the ratling plague, without aid or succour from the rest of the continent. When Procer fails, the light of civilization dims and the monsters all get a little closer to our homes."

– Eleusia Vokor, Nicean ambassador to the Principate

The League of Free Cities did not have an official seat, because that would require a hard majority of its constituent to agree on any single subject for any length of time.

Anaxares was of the opinion that this was even more unlikely than usual, these days. Stygia was on the wane, as they'd hit that part of the twenty-year cycle where their old slave soldiers were being discreetly butchered and the fresh ones finished their training, but their northern neighbours were in no shape to take advantage of it. Atalante and Delos were too busy fighting over control of trade routes to Mercantis to turn their attention elsewhere, a situation further inflamed by the murder of an Atalantian logothete at the hands of a frothing Delosi preacher. In Delos, the will of the Heavens and the will of the *asekretis* of the Secretariat were considered to be the same thing. Woe to anyone who would defy that vicious little pack of scribes. To make everything even more complicated, Helike had spawned one of their godsdamned Tyrants a few years back. The boy had promptly proceeded to piss all over the last fifty years of border treaties, seizing Nicean assets and tickling the chin of the Proceran princess in Tenerife. There was opportunity in that, however, for the Great City of Bellerophon. *First and Mightiest of the Free Cities, May She Reign Forever.*

Anaxares capitalized the words even in the privacy of his own mind because you never knew when the *kanenas* were looking into your thoughts. His delegation must have at least two of them out of the ten diplomats who'd accompanied him, not that he'd be able to tell which were part of Bellerophon's "agents for the protection of the people". His home was the only true democracy on the continent, a fact its citizens touted at every opportunity, but the will of the people was preserved by the spilling of blood. The *kanenas* made sure of that, ensuring anyone who looked like they were trying to seize power for themselves disappeared. A system of random lot-drawing made all appointments every three years, which meant the competence of the city's administration could vary wildly from one year to another. The only part of Bellerophon's state apparatus was that was not randomly allotted was the diplomatic service, of which Anaxares was unfortunately part of. The small pebble lodged inside his body – and that of all members of his family – was a grim reminder that at any point one of the *kanenas* could decide that he'd gotten ambitious and kill all of them with a word.

The pebble would return to its original size and break his body from the inside. It was, Anaxares had been told, a particularly gruesome way to die. His predecessor had been splattered all over the insides of a meeting hall in Nicae just for being offered a bribe.

Naturally, the filthy Penthesians had made a game of trying to have the envoys of Mighty Bellerophon executed by their own people in as few words as possible. The *kanenas* had gotten their hands on one of the sheets they used to tally scores and plastered copies all over the streets. There was a reason Anaxares' city kept trying to invade theirs, ugly knock-off Mercantis that it was. Did they really think that just because the wealth of Praes flowed through their river they were better than anyone else? They weren't even *Evil*. Admittedly Good and Evil in the Free Cities were more like backing a charioteer team than a true affiliation but the principle of the thing made it galling. You'd think the Dread Empress would send her gold to one of the cities on the right side of the metaphysical fence. Not that he'd ever say as much out loud: the Empress' agents were everywhere in the Free Cities these days, clashing in back alleys with those of the First Prince.

It was Helike's turn to host the League delegates, which no one had been all that happy about. The city had gone even madder than usual under the Tyrant, whipped into a frenzy at the memory of Theodosius the Unconquered and the legendary victories the man had achieved on the battlefield. Anaxares had been in the city for a mere fortnight and already could no longer stand to look at statues of the man. He was currently drinking from a cup with Theodosius' face on it and sitting on chair engraved with his work at the Siege of Tenerife, when the Helikeans had crawled through the sewers to avoid the butcher's bill taking the walls would have cost. The representative for Bellerophon shifted uncomfortably against the wooden frame, ignoring the screaming delegate from Atalante calling the senior Secretariat member from Delos a "quill-waving lunatic". His eyes flicked to the Tyrant in question, who'd named himself delegate for Helike instead of sending an actual diplomat.

The boy was dark-haired and olive-skinned, with a bloodshot red eye and a hand that seemed to be permanently shaking. He was sixteen, Anaxares knew, and had been sitting on the throne of Helike since he was twelve – when he'd seized power and sent his much older nephew fleeing in exile. *Bad seed*, the delegate for Bellerophon thought. The Tyrant had been smiling for what seemed to be hours now, and the grin widened when he met Anaxares' eyes from across the table. That same friendly young man had made swearing a stoning offense in his city and drowned a Nicean delegation in their own wine barrels when they'd protested their seizure. *Named*. Mad, every single one of them.

"Proper forms were filed by Secretariat members of good standing," the Delosi delegate said calmly. "The caravan went through our territory without a permit, seizing its merchandise was perfectly legal."

The woman's tone never rose, but it could be seen in her eyes she was beginning to get irritated. Fair enough, Anaxares thought. Atalantians got on everyone's nerves, what with the way they were moved to emotion so easily. The famous warrior Atalante who'd founded their city was said to have wept at the sight of the rising walls, so clearly it was some sort of cultural defect. Public weeping was not allowed in Bellerophon, as it had been deemed Against The Will Of The People.

"Is there a form for *murder*?" the Atalantian screeched, sounding triumphant like he'd achieved some sort of great victory with the reply.

The Secretariat member blinked.

"Seven," she said. "Though for five of them, after committing the crime the criminal must present themselves for execution within twelve hours."

That wasn't going anywhere, so Anaxares let his attention lapse and considered the other diplomats at the table. The Nicean delegate was listening carefully but the man *had* been hitting the wine pretty hard so this might actually seem interesting to him. The delegate from Stygia – Magister Zoe, she'd introduced herself as – was openly bored out of her skull and had been scribbling on a sheet of parchment for a while. Anaxares squinted at the lines while trying not to be too obvious about it. There were stanzas, he saw. It looked like a sung version of the argument between the Atalantian and the Delosi that had been lasting for the better part of an hour. Some liberties had been taken with the plot, unless he'd missed a lot of unspoken sexual tension between those two. The delegate from Penthes was... looking at him already. Smiling. Anaxares resisted the urge to make the sign of warding, the one that politely asked Evil to look at someone else instead please. That covered all the diplomats seated at the table, though there was another one seated on a bench a little to the side: the envoy from Mercantis.

The City of Bought and Sold was not part of the League proper, but they'd been granted the right to sit in on its meetings because of "aligned interests". Anaxares suspected a grand amount of bribes had also been involved in making that right part of the League's charter, though that was the kind of suspicion best left alone. The merchant lords of the Consortium did not have a standing army, or even a city guard, but they had a great deal of gold and enough hired killers to populate a small city. The woman Mercantis had sent was morbidly fat, of course. They always were. It seemed to be considered a prerequisite for rising to the higher tiers of the Consortium, and so anybody who could afford to pack on the weight did so with gusto. The waste that implied offended Anaxares' Bellerophan sensibilities. *The Grain Of The People Should Go To The People*, he thought, just in case one of

the *kanenas* was listening in. *Down With Foreign Despots, May Glorious Bellerophon Reign Forever.*

"You're wasting everybody's time," the Stygian magister said, breaking into the middle of the argument. "Either submit the matter to League arbitration or shut up."

Anaxares snorted. No one had ever submitted anything to League arbitration without being sure what the verdict would be ahead of the submission. If either of the arguing delegates had considered the incident worth the bribes and concessions buying a verdict would cost, they wouldn't have been bickering about it in the first place. His amusement had been noticed, though.

"Do you find my people's pain amusing, Bellerophon?" the Atalantian said.

"The Glorious Republic of Bellerophon has no stance on the incident," he said.

"You're a person, *you* should have an opinion," the man said dramatically.

Anaxares went very still.

"I am a mere vessel for the will of the people," he babbled hurriedly, "unfit to pass judgement on my own. Long Live The Republic, Peerless Jewel Of Freedom."

Eyes closed he waited for the pebble to shift and tear through his organs. There was a long moment of silence in the room, but nothing happened.

"Damn," the Penthesian said. "That would have been a five pointer."

"Don't blow up the Bellerophon, this one is less fucking insane than the usual ones," the Nicean delegate said.

"*Language*, you two," the Tyrant said. "Please, ladies and gentlemen, let us have some decorum."

No one felt quite safe enough to roll their eyes at that. Diplomatic immunity only went so far when you were dealing with a Tyrant.

"Delos sees no need to submit the matter to arbitration," the Secretariat member said.

The Atalantian looked like he'd just bit into something foul.

"Neither does the city of Atalante," he said.

"Good," the Nicean delegate said, after draining his seventh cup of wine. "If that's over with, the city of Nicae had a motion to submit for League consideration."

He held out his cup for a servant to fill again. Anaxares raised an eyebrow. He doubted this would be a rehash of the old Nicae demand for the League to declare war on Ashur – no one else cared that the Thalassocracy suppressed Nicean commerce. If they'd wanted to own the Samite Gulf, they should have won at least one of the four wars they'd fought for it. Ashur made sure to line the pockets of all the other cities with fleets anyway, which ensured their predominance at sea would never be seriously challenged. Not that any of this mattered to Anaxares: Bellerophon was landlocked. *Ships Are The Work Of Wicked Foreign Oligarchies*, he added just to cover his bases.

"The Strategos feels that tensions with the Principate have been escalated unnecessarily," the Nicean said. "Their civil war is over and the First Prince has the principalities in order: we need to nip this in the bud before they turn in our direction."

Everybody carefully did not look at the Tyrant, who had both the distinctions of being the boy responsible for those elevated tensions and the ruler who'd be expected to lead the armies of the League if it came to war. That wasn't a coincidence: whenever Procer came knocking, Helike always became the first among equals. Their army might not have been as large as Stygia's, but it had never lost a war to the Stygians either.

"To achieve this," the Nicean continued, "the Strategos has ordered me to present a motion to open ten-year truce negotiations with the Principate."

Anaxares' eyes flicked from one delegate to another. The magister was surprised but no one else seemed to be, not even the Tyrant. Ah. As he'd earlier thought, no one ever bothered to present a motion without knowing what the results of the vote would be. Of the seven Free Cities, four were aligned with Good – Nicae, Atalante, Delos and Penthes. Bellerophon and Stygia openly embraced the Gods Below, while Helike waffled between one side or another depending on whoever ruled them at the time. Even if rivalries between cities usually trumped any greater allegiance to the Gods, when it came to League foreign policy the Good cities tended to stick together. They never pushed too far of course, since forcing their will too often would trigger the collapse of the League, but it looked like this was going to be one of those times where they banded together.

"Atalante votes in favour," the diplomat said.

"Delos votes in favour," the woman from the Secretariat said.

"Penthes votes in favour as well," the filthy Penthesian added.

Well, that carried the vote. Some advantage might be gained in ensuring a Bellerophon presence when the negotiations begun, and the four cities having their way here should give him enough leverage to ensure that. Anaxares signalled a... servant, repulsive as that thought was – *People May Be Servants Of The State But Never Of Other People, A Thousand Years Of Damnation On Vile Foreign Autocrats* – to fill his cup of wine but the woman drifted away without apparently seeing him gesture. Irritating.

"We won't be doing any of that," the Tyrant said cheerfully. "Procer can go hang and the pox on anyone who says differently, if you'll forgive my language."

Magister Zoe raised an eyebrow. They had a talent for condescension, the Stygians. The ones who weren't slaves anyway.

"I sympathize with the sentiment, but a majority has been reached. Exactly how do you intend to reverse it?"

"Well," the Tyrant began, bloodshot eye fluttering, but he was interrupted by a dull thump.

The Nicean delegate had hit the table face-first, cup of wine still in hand. The man did not look to be breathing, and Anaxares' own breath caught. The Delosi slumped in her chair a moment later, the Atalantian had just enough time to scream before choking and the Penthesian simply... stopped moving, between two heartbeats.

"The dosage must have been inaccurate," the Tyrant mused. "Someone's getting stoned for that. I had this entire speech planned, I was going to sweep my arm and then-"

The young man made a noise Anaxares assumed was meant to represent death by poison, which was by definition silent.

"This is madness," the Stygian barked, apparently unshaken by the fresh murder of over half the people in the room.

That was the slavers for you: ice all the way to the soul.

"The poison?" the Tyrant asked, surprised. "It was quite affordable, actually. Bought it from Mercantis."

The representative from the Consortium had not moved since the deaths and seemed utterly unconcerned. She was openly amused at Magister Zoe's angry look.

"The Consortium believes in a modern, cost-effective form of murder," she said. "A wide range of substances is available to any with the means."

"I believe she was referring to the act of poisoning itself, Lord Tyrant," Anaxares said, surprised at how steady his voice sounded.

Having carried a death sentence in his stomach since the age of twelve had done wonders for his composure, the delegate from Bellerophon reflected.

"There will be war for this," the magister barked. "Murdering envoys? It's-"

"Villainous?" the Tyrant said softly, smiling again.

His bad eye looked redder now. Like it had fed on the deaths. His hand was not shaking for the first time since Anaxares had met him. The Bellerophon was something of a connoisseur in the domain of foreboding, and considered that sign a particularly ominous one.

"That's the problem with Magisters," the boy said cheerfully. "It's all slavery and murder with you, there's no *art* to it. No whimsy. When's the last time any of you did anything just because you could?"

He gestured enthusiastically.

"You're taking it too seriously. You have all this power and all you ever use it for is making sure you keep it. Do you have any idea how *boring* that is?"

"Stygia will have no part of this idiot war of yours," the magister hissed.

"Of course you'll take part," the Tyrant grinned. "And you'll be on my side, too. Because if you're not I'll sack your city, tear down your walls and swell my ranks with your slaves."

"Am I to assume this threat extends to Bellerophon?" Anaxares said calmly.

"Anaxares, was it?" the boy asked. "I have to say, I'm loving the whole serenity thing you have going on. And if your Republic doesn't back me, I'll roast your children like poultry and sell them in Praes. Maybe overcharge on transport, they've been screwing us on tariffs recently."

"You're at war with over half the League and you're threatening the rest?" Magister Zoe said, sounding appalled.

She had, the Bellerophon thought, yet to grasp exactly what it was they were dealing with here. Magisters were too used to being in control. Anaxares had never been under that delusion: his people were the current carrying him, on any day as likely to dash him on the rocks as they were to carry him safely to shore.

Having no real influence over the course of his life was a familiar feeling. If he cared enough to comfort the foreigner, he would have told her it got easier after you stopped thinking of your future too much. Much like drowning, it was much easier on you if you didn't struggle.

"Four cities or six or half of Creation," the Tyrant shrugged. "It makes no difference to me. Gods Below, act Evil for once in your life. It's like it's a hobby with you people."

That red eye shone malevolently as the Named stared them down.

"It's not a hobby, my friends, it's a side. A side in the war that defines Creation. Did you think you could sit the fence forever? Speak the words without ever paying the price? Naughty, naughty, if you'll forgive my language."

The Tyrant grinned and for a moment all Anaxares could see was that horrible red orb and the curved stretch of pearly white teeth. A devil's grin on a devil's face.

"We're the villains, my friends. We're the things out there in the night that they're all afraid of, the reason they bar their doors and shutter their windows. This place is in *dire* need of being remembered that truth."

The boy laughed and Anaxares shivered.

"So muster your armies, rustle up your devils and let your monsters out of their cages. Let's have us a jolly good time, eh?"

The Bellerophan decided to call for another cup of wine and didn't particularly care if it was poisoned or not.

—

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, put down her correspondence.

Her quarters in Orense were like a warrior past his prime: fair to look at still, but already showing signs of decay. She was not surprised. Prince Rodrigo of Orense's finances could aptly be described as "dregs": the commerce that had begun to bloom again had petered out, his fields emptied of farmers who'd died as soldiers and the entire south of the principality had been ransacked by Dominion raiders. The man could no longer afford to live in the style he was accustomed to, and for a prince of Procer there were few blows harder to one's pride than that. It had turned the older man bitter, as had his repeated bloody defeats in the Proceran civil war. Though he'd never been a claimant himself, the two candidates the prince backed had been crushed by other alliances after he'd sunk his fortune into their

causes. And now the Dominion of Levant was pillaging his lands with impunity, or at least had been until Cordelia came south. Gratitude might have been expected, but then the man was an Arlesite.

The army Uncle Klaus had raised was not as full of northerners as the one that had won her the throne, but the core of the host had still been forged on the battlefields of Lange and Aisne. It was there that Lycaonese steel, tempered against the rattling warbands of the Chain of Hunger and the endless harassment of the Kingdom of the Dead, had proved superior to the numbers of southern principalities. Numbers were still Cordelia's problem, as it happened. There were only four Lycaonese principalities: Rhenia, Hannover, Bremen and Neustria. Though neither Bremen nor Neustria were surrounded by mountains as the other two were, their lands were still hard to farm on. The four Lycaonese principalities had the four smallest populations of any principality in Procer, and though unlike southerners the Lycaonese had universal military service the attrition still rankled. She could only afford to lose so many soldiers from her support base before she was too weak to strong-arm the Highest Assembly.

So now she drew from the ranks of her allies, the princes and princesses who'd joined her willingly when it became clear her cause was on the rise. Few principality troops had been made available to her, but her allies had not been stingy with *fantassins*. Cordelia was somewhat unschooled in matters military, but as her uncle explained it these were men and women who'd served as peasant levies in the the civil war after being disposed by the fighting, making it their trade. Not as good as soldiers who'd trained since infancy, but those were costly and hard to replace. There were tens of thousands of *fantassins* floating around Procer at the moment, the First Prince knew. People who could only live for violence and now found themselves without anyone willing to pay for them to commit it. She needed a war, and quickly, before they turned on their own people. The first step in mitigating the problem was folding as many of them as she could into the ranks of her own armies, but that wouldn't be enough. She'd have to accelerate the economic recovery of the south to find them lands to occupy, which she'd been trying to avoid until her position was better secured.

She'd a received a report that morning from Uncle Klaus announcing he'd thrown the last Dominion raiders out of the south of Orense and set up defensive positions a few miles away from the Red Snake Wall, which had been one problem solved. That was not the report she was looking at, though: this one was from an agent of hers in the Free Cities, informing her that two days ago the Tyrant of Helike had murdered four League delegates in broad daylight, then declared war on their cities. Calmly, she placed down the letter on the surface of her gilded desk.

She'd pressured, bribed and otherwise convinced the leaders of the same cities whose envoys had been poisoned to pass a motion to negotiate a ten-year truce with the Principate. It had taken her years and quite a bit of silver, but she'd done it. And when she had, she'd known there would be two ways that League session could end: either the Evil cities accepted the muzzle, or there would be war. Either one would force Helike to cease probing at Tenerife's borders, binding the princess who was already one of her closest allies to her even closer. *And it would secure our south-eastern flank*, she thought. The Tyrant of Helike still stood alone, as far as she knew, but the odds were that the other two Evil cities would join him. Could she influence them the other way, to stack the odds towards the outcome she desired? Bellerophon was more or less impossible to affect measurably, since they executed anyone who looked like they might put some order to the mob that ruled the city. Stygia... No. She was weak in that city and the Empire owned the ruling coalition of magisters body and soul. Literally, in some cases. Stygia would lean in the direction Malicia wanted it to.

Who would win the war? Stygia and Helike had the two largest armies, but Nicae had the largest population and Penthes was the richest. Both sides would be emptying Mercantis of mercenaries before the month was done, lining the pockets of the Consortium with their bidding wars. As things currently stood, Cordelia would be inclined to believe that the Good League would beat the Evil League. And yet the Tyrant had triggered this war. The boy had something up his sleeve, something more deadly than a mere Name. More than that, it was a certainty that Praes would intervene. They would not send one of the Legions south, but the First Prince suspected the Calamities would be coming down. A counterweight was needed, Cordelia knew, but she did not need to trouble herself with that. The Heavens had already provided: a fortnight ago a ship had docked in Nicae carrying the White Knight, returned from his years in the Titanomachy. The survivors of the Lone Swordsman's band of heroes would cluster around the new one, though how many had survived Liesse she did not know.

The Thief was still reportedly alive, but no one had seen the Wandering Bard in weeks. Liesse had been such a mess she was still trying to sort out exactly what had happened there. Devils had been summoned, then disarmed. The Squire had forced the surrender of the Baroness Dormer then spared the woman. She'd killed the Lone Swordsman and apparently returned from the dead, which the House of Light adamantly maintained was impossible. There was already talk in Salia of naming her an abomination in the eyes of the Heavens. The entire Liesse Rebellion had died an ugly death at the hands of this Callowan slip of a girl and her master, killed with a whimper instead of the bang Cordelia had been hoping for. Daoine had never entered the war, and was now on the back foot with the Tower since one of Duchess Kegan's relatives had been caught helping a hero.

Had her observers not gotten a close look at the Legions of Terror in action, Cordelia would have called the entire affair a detestable waste of silver and lives. Several books' worth of reports were already being compiled into a combat doctrine that would see use in the crusade, but she'd failed to meet all her other objectives. Praesi hegemony in Callow was stronger than ever and the Empress had killed unrest for good with her masterstroke of a "ruling council". Considering there would be four Praesi sitting on that council, Malicia had come out of this rebellion with tighter control over her foreign holdings than she'd started with. Trying to hobble the Empress was like cutting off a hydra's head: every time two more grew, more vicious and cunning than the last. At least the woman's nobility was giving her trouble. As well they should: Cordelia had been sinking coin into their cause for half a decade using a labyrinthine series of intermediaries. Her payback for the depredations of the Pravus Bank.

Things were unfolding all across of Calernia and Cordelia could not longer afford to grant the Dominion the lion's share of her attention. It was time to end this. Setting aside her correspondence, the First Prince of Procer took a fresh sheet of parchment and dipped her quill in the ink.

—

"We're too close to the wall, I don't like it," Prince Klaus Hasenbach announced for a third time.

"They need specific conditions to wake the snake," Cordelia said calmly. "Which we do not meet."

In a concession to the heat of summer, the First Prince had worn a dress of a much paler blue than was present on the heraldry of Rhenia. It ended conservatively above her collarbone, tailored to hide the way her Hasenbach blood had seen her born with shoulders better fit for a lumberjack than a noble. The cloth of gold bordering the cut suggested the outline of her chest without lingering inappropriately, as the belt of sapphires set in gold that hung loosely on her hip did for that curve. Her long blond tresses had been carefully combed and bound with a brooch that had been in her family since days before the Principate, a beautiful little piece shaped like the spearman that was the emblem of the Hasenbachs. The crown, though, was from Salia. A simple circlet made from white gold, a metal only the First Prince could wear in public by ancient law. It was meant to subtly set the aside the ruler of Procer from all others.

The pavilion Cordelia had ordered raised was not close enough to the Red Snake wall to be in its shadow at this time of day, but in a bell it would be. The structure was impressive, seen from this close. The foundations only stood ten feet tall, limestone painted over red, but the bulk of it was the titanic sculpted red

granite snake that stretched from the sea to the beginning of Brocelian Forest. The sheer scale of it was absurd, the largest project ever undertaken by the gigantes outside of the borders of the Titanomachy. That it was enchanted to protect the Dominion of Levant from any who would seek to pass it was arguably even more absurd: enchantment on that scale was almost without precedent. Only the Miezans had ever cast magic on that scale, as far as she knew. It made assailing the Dominion by land impossible, though landing ships far enough down the coast was still an option.

Lady Itima of the Bandit's Blood, ruler of Vaccei, would know this. The other members of the Majilis had already told her she would get no support from the rest of the Dominion in a closed session so she'd had to look for support elsewhere. Her bloodline's ancient ties to the gigantes weren't strong enough for them to break their enforced isolationism, which had seen her turn to Ashur instead. The Thalassocracy was the natural choice for an ally, really. The Ashurans had supported the war of independence that had seen Levant form out of former Proceran principalities and it was a central tenet of their foreign policy to ensure Procer never became a sea power. The Thalassocracy's war fleet dwarfed the Proceran one by a rapport of ten to one, all of them lifelong sailors who could only rise through the citizenship tiers by uninterrupted service. Some of them would even have experience in naval warfare, as two decades ago Nicea's latest attempt to gain primacy in the Samite Gulf had been bloodily suppressed by their captains. In comparison, the Principate had never fought a single major naval engagement in the nation's entire history.

As long as Ashur backed Vaccei, it was untouchable.

Itima would know this, and when she came it would be with the swagger of a woman who knew the Principate would beggar itself if its armies camped out in southern Orense until she got bored. She would expect concessions, perhaps even angle for the ceding of territory. This was a negotiation now, though. Cordelia's uncle had spent his days learning the trade of war and come out of it one of the finest generals on Calernia, but swords had never been the First Prince's way. She'd learned diplomacy and intrigue, spent years sharpening her mind by fighting the most dangerous woman on Calernia across the continent in a hundred different simultaneous battlefields. Itima of the Bandit's Blood had picked the wrong battlefield to challenge her on. When the ruler in question arrived, her favourite refreshments had already been set up – chilled wine from Alava – and attendants swarmed around her delegation like hummingbirds around nectar. Uncle Klaus had wanted to remain seated when she arrived as a sign of his disdain, but Cordelia had given him a steady look until he conceded the matter. When it came to etiquette, he usually did.

Itima was a middle-aged woman with tanned skin, startling blue eyes and hair cut so closely it might as well have been shaved. Her two sons followed her closely, tall young men with hard faces and the scars of people who had seen battle before. Likely they'd been the ones leading the raids their mother had ordered. Cordelia smiled sweetly at them and the younger of the two gave a startled blush before he blanked his face. Their mother was not so easily charmed and eyed the goblet of wine presented to her with distrust before turning her attention to the First Prince. Who stood there and said nothing. Silence fell across the pavilion, broken only by the murmured of Cordelia's attendants seating the rest of the delegation and plying them with treats and flattery.

"Your Most Serene Highness," Itima finally said.

Good. An acknowledgement of Cordelia's superior rank was the right tone to set for this conversation.

"Lady Itima of the Bandit's Blood," Cordelia replied, elegantly taking the seat at the head of the table before the woman could slight her before doing it first.

The ruler of Vaccei took the seat facing her, the two sons looming behind the chair in a rather meagre attempt at intimidation tactics.

"If I may introduce Prince Klaus Papenheim of Hannover," she said, nodding at her uncle.

Said uncle was drinking from the cider cup she'd arranged for him to get specifically so he wouldn't talk.

"My sons, Moro and Tarif of the Bandit's Blood," the blue-eye woman replied, not bothering to specify which was which.

Not that she needed to. Cordelia had extensive files on every member of Itima's allies and family. Tarif was the younger one who'd blushed, and had a well-documented fondness for blondes. He was quite good in bed, the agent who'd sent the report had assured her. The First Prince found him handsome enough, but a dalliance with someone of his rank might have an expectation of marriage – which she'd made a point of avoiding. It gave her much leverage in Procer.

"Would any of you care for a meal before we begin negotiations?" she offered.

"I'd care for you to stop wasting my time," Itima said. "We're here because I've got you in a corner and you know it. I have my demands. Most of them are not negotiable."

Cordelia smiled politely, then gesture for one of the attendants to step forward. The young girl bowed and lightly set a scroll on the table. Lady Itima seemed about to say something scathing until she noticed the seal keeping it closed. A ship with a crown for a sail, seven coins forming a half-circle above it. The official seal of the Thalassocracy of Ashur, used only on formal diplomatic documents.

"What is this?" the Levantine asked.

"A reassessment of our respective positions," Cordelia said.

Itima broke it open and began reading, skipping the first few paragraphs and the inevitable niceties and title-trading they consisted of. The fair-haired Lycaonese knew the moment Itima first arrived to the actual treaty terms because the tan woman's face dropped.

"This is a fake," the Levantine said accusingly.

"You know it is not," the First Prince said calmly. "The Thalassocracy will remain neutral in the event of a war between you and the Principate, so long as the borders remain unchanged afterwards."

"I have assurances for half of the third tier citizen's they'll sack your entire coast," Itima barked.

"Yes, and that was cleverly done," Cordelia conceded. "Yet all of them fall silent when the only second tier citizen speaks."

Ashur's citizenship tiers were a maze to outsiders, as there were over twenty of them, but it could be understood that the dozen or so third tier citizens ran the Thalassocracy on a day-to-day basis. The only individual to stand above them was Magon Hadast, a man in his seventies whose ancestor had been the captain of the initial ship of settlers to populate the island. There could only be one second tier citizen for any colony of the Baalite Hegemony – which Ashur still technically was – at any time, and there was no rising any higher than that: first tier citizens could only be born in Tyre, the city to have spawned the entire Hegemony. Magon's word was law in Ashur, and though he was not a heavy-handed ruler he'd been displeased at the idea of getting in a slugging match with the Principate over the ambitions of a single woman from the Dominion.

"The old man doesn't speak," the Levantine said.

"Not to you," Cordelia said. "You are a skilled diplomat, Lady Itima, and an intelligent woman. I am both those things, but I also happen to have the resources of the greatest surface nation on the continent at my disposal. This defeat does not speak of incompetence but of a mere disparity of means."

"We'll hold the beaches against you," the ruler of Vaccei said, anger glittering in her eyes.

"The first time, perhaps," the First Prince said. "But the time after that? Or the next? We will land eventually. And we will bury you in numbers until Vaccei falls."

"The rest of the Majilis will side with me the moment you tread Dominion soil," she said.

"The rest of the Majilis are already considering which of their relatives should rule Vaccei after the removal of your dynasty," Cordelia explained gently. "I am not invading Levant, Lady Itima, I am ending a threat to Procer."

"And you'll just leave after you take back your old principality, will you?" Moro sneered.

Cordelia met his eyes and smiled kindly.

"I do not want a war, Lord Moro," she said. "I am not the one who crossed borders and sacked towns. Frankly, the loss of so much life needlessly appals me."

"There's a reason we have the wall in the first place, Proceran," Itima said. "We know your kind."

There was a truth in that, Cordelia knew. Many a First Prince or Princess had looked south and pondered the fresh conquest of old territory, their hands stayed only by the attention of Ashur and the impossibility of taking the Red Snake Wall.

"The Principate has done foul things in the past, it is true," she said. "Taking Levant – and then trying to keep it – was one. The occupation of Callow after the Third Crusade was another."

"The League Wars," Tarif counted out quietly. "The Humbling of Titans. The Red Flower Massacre."

And hadn't they paid grand prices, for all those foreign adventures? Just like Dread Empress Triumphant's red-handed madness had directly led to the formation of the Principate after her fall, Procer had given birth to its own enemies. The Principate was more distrusted in Callow than any other nation save for the Empire, the gigantes killed Procerans on sight south of Valencis and old Arlesite warmongering was the reason there was a League of Free Cities at all. Cordelia believed the Principate had grown as large as it would ever be. All that further wars would accomplish was set the rest of the continent against them, and they could not *afford* that. Alamans and Arlesites principalities had the luxury to believe the might of Procer was unchallenged, safe in their southern domains, but Cordelia knew differently. She was Lycaonese, from the tip of her

toes to the crown of her head, and all of her people knew one truth as sure as they knew their own breath: Evil is real. It is not a story or a lesson, it is a piece of Creation as true as rain or music. Evil is on the other side of the mountain, of the lake, and when spring comes it will march for your home. And it will never, ever stop unless you *make* it.

"When I became First Prince," Cordelia said, "I gained another title. Warden of the West."

"Aye, your kind have claimed to be 'wardens' of our land for a long time," Itima said with a hard look.

"I do not think that it was that title should mean," the fair-haired woman said. "Not anymore. Gods, Lady Itima, we were so busy squabbling over a crown that we allowed Praes to conquer an entire kingdom. That is not what the Principate *should* be."

"And what is that, exactly?" Moro asked with a thin smile.

"*We are the wall*," Cordelia said, and she spoke with the ironclad belief of a hundred generations of Hasenbachs before her. "We are the bulwark between the West and the monsters. We have been looking south all those years, and now Evil wakes. Do you think the Tower will stand alone, when their Legions spill out onto the continent? The Dead King will rise from his slumber and *drown the world in death*. The Everdark will band under a single banner and etch the Tenets of Night in blood across our cities. The Chain of Hunger grows larger and bolder every spring, and when they come it will not be in warbands – their hordes will blot out the horizon."

She leaned forward.

"So *please*," she said, speaking as sincerely as she ever had. "Do not make me fight you, Lady Itima. There will be only one war that matters in my lifetime, and it will not be in the south."

The tanned woman looked shaken.

"You ask me to ignore centuries of bad blood," she said hesitatingly.

"I ask you to stand with me," Cordelia replied quietly. "Not as a subject or a vassal, but as an ally."

She could see it in the sons' eyes, that they understood. What was coming, crawling closer to them every day.

"They say there is only one choice we can make that ever really matters," the First Prince of Procer said. "I beg you, for all our sakes. Make the right one."

She offered a hand, and after a long moment the ruler of Vaccei took it. The rest of the Dominion would follow, Cordelia knew. It would not be enough. Gods forgive her, but it would not be enough. She'd have to intervene in the Free Cities, to make peace between Ashur and its rivals, to somehow mend bridges with the Titanomachy. Cordelia would have to lie and scheme and strike deals in the dark of night until her desperate, ramshackle alliance stood together.

Because the madmen were coming. The monsters of legend. The ones that cast shadows on the world from their flying fortresses, who broke the very fabric of Creation with their sorceries. They were coming, and while the Principate had bled itself in a hundred wars they had *learned*. Cordelia had always loved the words of her mother's family, the quietly dignified Pappenheim boast thrown in the face of the Enemy, but in the end she was a Hasenbach first. It ran in her blood, the old duty no one had given them but they had taken up anyway. Because it was right, because they could, because no one else would.

Because We Must.

Gods Above, let that be enough.

Epilogue

"Your mistake, Queen of Blades, is in thinking that virtue is the province of Good. Every Tyrant who has ever claimed the Tower, every fool and every madman, had the seed of greatness in them. Courage, cleverness, ambition, will. We may lose our way, we may lose ourselves, but every time we get... a little closer. You think I am afraid of death? I am a droplet in the tide that will drown Creation. I take pride in this, even in my hour of failure. Empresses rise, Empresses fall. But the Tower? Oh, the Tower endures."

– Last words of Dread Empress Regalia the First

"It's an ugly thing, isn't it?"

There was truth in that. So many tales had been woven around the throne of Praes that the lies could no longer be told from the truth, but there was no denying the thing was ghastly. Stone and iron welded together brutally by a man without a single artistic speck to his soul. The first Warlock had many talents, it was said in the records, but creation was not one of them. The pile of stone was squat and rough, the back of the seat slightly crooked towards the left and the iron used to keep it together had dripped onto the floor when heated. After Triumphant had brought down the Tower on her killers in a final act of spite, it

had been found intact. Not a single loose stone had so much as touched it. The people who'd dug up the room had all gone mad and killed themselves within a week of unearthing it.

The throne of Praes was not for the sight of meek souls.

"It should be," Amadeus said. "They had a firmer grasp on the truth of what we are, back then."

An empire cobbled together out of warring tribes and kingdoms who had failed to unite even in the face of the invading Miezans. A lie agreed on by Taghreb and Soninke, by the orcs and the goblins, that the peace forced upon them by the foreigners could survive their leaving. Praes was not a Mtethwa or Taghrebi word – it was Old Miezani, ripped from the hands of the enemy and held aloft as a trophy by the first Dread Empress. Maleficent had known, he believed, all the peoples of the Empire should be remembered the clang of shackles every time they spoke of their nation. That way they would never forget the War of Chains, forget that there had been a time all had been humbled. *Once we could not look beyond our own knives and petty disputes, so Creation buried us. Remember.*

A hopeful woman, Dread Empress Maleficent. She'd been hopeful all the way until the High Lord of Wolof had stabbed her in the back and stolen her throne, laying bare the truth of her empire: power gained through the spilling of blood will be taken by the spilling of blood. Always. Praes could be held, but it could not be owned. There would be no Dead King to reign forever here, no Tenets of Night all must bow to. The Dread Empire would have a hundred thousand Tyrants, all of them lost and grasping beyond their reach until their doom fell upon them. And the Tyrant would rise anew, with fire in their eyes and unquenchable ambition in their stomach that Creation would deny – but oh, the craving. Wasn't the craving what it was all about? It was an unusually poetic thought for Amadeus, a man not particularly prone to sentiment outside of some very defined boundaries. He did not linger on it.

A thousand poets had etched their sentences on the soul of the Wasteland, but he was not one of them. The legacy he sought was of a different sort, if no less elusive.

"We all know it's a lie, Maddie," Alaya laughed. "Look at all those pretty gildings close around the throne – close, but not touching. Some lines even Praesi won't cross."

The hall was empty, would have been for the better part of a bell. Alaya always put up the most vicious wards available to the mistress of the Tower whenever they claimed this place for their drinking. Tonight they had, by informal agreement, chosen to sit by Dread Emperor Malevolent III. 'The Pithy', the histories of Praes named him. As far as Amadeus knew, he'd done little in his

ten years or reigning save for putting a goblin rebellion and failing spectacularly at making the empire a naval power. The Ashurans had sailed straight into Thalassina and burned the half-built fleet: the only surviving captains had immediately defected, setting themselves up as pirates in the Tideless Isles and becoming a recurring blade in the back on the Empire's merchant shipping.

There would be, he knew, a little detail about the man he did not know that would surprise a laugh out of him when linked to something Alaya said to him tonight. She'd always delighted in weaving little hidden jests in her words for him to find later when thinking back on them. She'd been like that even the Sentinels had come for her at her father's inn, before the soft but deadly games of the seraglio had honed that skill into a blade that cut as often as it teased. Many a lord and lady of Praes had woken up in the dead of night weeks after their audience with Malicia, shivering when they realized the full implications of a seemingly innocent sentence. Amadeus took the bottle when the Dread Empress of Praes offered it, tossing back a gulp of terrible wine and grimacing at the taste.

"Gods, I'm not sure why we keep drinking that swill," he said.

"Nostalgia," Malicia mused. "Of all the spirits made on Calernia, though, I will concede that the ones made in the Green Stretch are the worst. By far."

She pulled deeply at the bottle when he passed it back, wiping the smooth back of her hand against her mouth without even the pretence of manners. Times like this, Amadeus could still glimpse the girl he'd known. The one with the laughing eyes and the burning ambition, still unhardened by the dark days ahead of her. And yet, save for a few conversations by moonlight, he'd never known much of that girl. It was the promise of Malicia to come he had truly struck a friendship with. The half-tread path between smiling Alaya and the hard-eyed Dread Empress who would rule over the Wasteland.

"It tastes like dirt and lack of prospects," he said after taking another drink.

Alaya snorted. If one of her courtiers had ever seen or heard her do something so undignified, they would have thought their senses to be lying before they believed it to be truth. It still warmed him, after all these years, that she trusted him enough to allow that small part of herself that belonged only to her to flicker into life in front of him.

"Truly," she said, "the taste of home."

She raised the bottle in a mocking salute to the throne.

"To the Green Stretch," Amadeus toasted. "And the most glorious mud in all of Creation."

The tone was sardonic, but the memories ran deeper than that. Back to a time where they had been nobodies in the breadbasket of a failing empire: him thinly clad in a Name he'd put on as a deserter's cloak, her as the great beauty of a town so small it was not on all maps. They'd rise, hadn't they? Gone further than they had any right to. *Not that right ever mattered much to either of us.*

"It actually costs more to have it brought to the Tower than to buy the wine itself," Alaya admitted, tone amused. "I buy it in crates to satiate my conscience."

"You have entire crates of this horror somewhere in the Tower?" Black said. "Truly, your arsenal is a fearsome one."

Thunder crackled outside just after he spoke, lending his words a strangely ironic weight. There was always a storm of sorts around the Tower, raging or preparing to rage. Wekesa had informed him the rapidly shifting weather patterns across the Wasteland were linked to the phenomenon, though Amadeus had not inquired further after making sure that link could not be exploited to control said weather. Pity, that. The desertification of the Wasteland would never be entirely undone, but it could have been mitigated with the right tools. Laying back against the marble pillar, an old friend by his side, Amadeus watched the unfolding history of Praes made mosaic across a floor and said nothing.

"Hasenbach has flipped Ashur," Alaya finally said, and the amusement was gone.

He did not ask if she was sure. Her agents had penetrated the Thalassocracy deeper than Eudokia's, and they did not make mistakes.

"We still own his son," he said.

"He's just a voice in their committees, until his father dies," Alaya said.

That was always the problem, with Ashur. They genuinely believed in their tiers, that a higher-ranked citizen was fully deserving of the authority granted to them and that trying to overreach before promotion was worthy of contempt. The Baalite hierarchy had sunk so deeply into their society that even centuries after the Hegemony had become irrelevant to the larger affairs of Creation, eclipsed by younger and greater powers, the tiers were still held as sacrosanct. As long as Magon Hadast lived Ashur would be a friend to Procer. A wary and self-interested friend, but that would be enough if the right promises were made. They would be, of that Amadeus had no doubt.

"That girl becomes more dangerous to us every year," he said.

"That girl *is* us," Alaya said, "forty years ago, looking at the stars from a different land."

The dark-haired man did not reply immediately, silenced by the accuracy of the thought. They'd always known that there would be a price to pay for what they had done in Procer, for the lives he'd had Assassin take and the wars Malicia had kindled with gold and soft words. The First Prince was finally coming to collect. Did he regret it? No, the thought came immediately. It had been a strategic imperative for the Principate to be paralyzed during the Conquest if it was to succeed. That war had always been going to find their doorstep. All their plots had done was delay the first knock by a few decades.

"Levant, now Ashur. She's trying to forge an alliance against us," he said. "Dear Cordelia might get her crusade, after all."

The tone was light, the implications were not. If Hasenbach managed to forge her broader, continental version of the League of Free Cities she only had to wait until the pretext for a Tenth Crusade fell into her lap. Amadeus held no illusions about the fact that it would.

"The Free Cities are where we can kill this in the egg," Alaya said. "The more that war spins out of control..."

The more Hasenbach's allies would be tempted to ignore her overtures of peace and order to get involved and claim their cut of the spoils. The moment two forces belonging to two different of her would-be crusaders met with swords out her entire enterprise would collapse. Alaya had the influence abroad to ensure that much. If it happened. Neither of them trusted anybody currently involved in the war to make this happen, unfortunately. Sending in the Legions of Terror, while tempting, would give Hasenbach a gathering cry for all Good and banner for her damned crusade. Which meant a smaller, more measured intervention.

"Wekesa will meet me by the Wasaliti," Amadeus said. "We'll all take a ship down through Mercantis."

From there, he would see where the weakness in the Good League was. Penthes, most likely, for Praesi influence had gained ground there in recent years. However little of that was currently left, it did not matter: the Calamities had done more with lesser openings.

"Squire will be getting her vote and veto earlier than anticipated," Alaya said mildly.

"It was always the plan she would get them eventually," Amadeus said.

"After you schooled her properly in ruling," Malicia murmured.

And there was the rub, he knew. It was one thing to entrust to a seventeen-year-old Callowan girl – with occasionally more mouth to her than sense – half of the territory in the Empire *after* he had taught her what he knew of ruling, quite another to do so *before*. Alaya's fears were not unwarranted, he thought. For at least the first year, Catherine was likely to butcher and coerce her way through anything she perceived as an obstacle. She would do so mercilessly and without hesitation, too, because there was something utterly ruthless at the core of Catherine Foundling. Callowan defiance, perhaps, but married with something brutally pragmatic. Something that would use what it could not break and break what it could not use. Sabah had once told him that Catherine was what a child of his and Hye's would be like, and though he'd batted away the notion he had not denied it. It was, he knew, a dangerous sort of attachment.

"The deep end is where she learns best," he said.

"You sound proud," Alaya noted.

Amadeus laughed quietly into the great and empty hall.

"Two years, Allie," he said. "She has been at this for two years, and already two heroes are dead at her hand. Everything they sent against her, she has *scattered*. Armies, devils, even a demon. Gods Below, a few months ago she all but *mugged* an angel."

He reached for the bottle and took a swig.

"Proud?" he said. "Proud does not do it justice."

Alaya took back the bottle and drank deeply before setting it on the cold floor.

"Affection," she said fondly, "has always been your weakness. One you turned into a strength of sorts, but still a weakness."

That was why they'd always functioned so well, they both knew. Because Alaya could see the things he was blind to and take the measures he would not, because he was willing to make the leaps of faith when she had run out of faith years ago. Nefarious had much to answer for. He'd died by Alaya's hand, and Amadeus had not been willing to step in the way of a hatred so earned and bloody, but if he had... Poison would not have been his weapon. He would have unleashed the reserves of viciousness Wekesa had deep inside of him, made it a death no one would ever forget as long as Creation stood. And Wekesa would have done it, without even needing to be asked, because his oldest friend loved Alaya too in his own way. In a way less trusting and more aware, he thought, but that did not detract from the depths of it. Warlock had wanted her on that throne as much as Black did, after the civil

war, wanted to see the hint of the laughter they'd known return to those dark eyes. Wanted to see the fear gone from them.

"Before I go south," he said. "There is still one matter to attend."

"Heiress," she said.

"She has defied Imperial authority twice, Alaya," he said. "First with the demon, then again at Liesse. She was planning on capturing the Hashmallim, for what purpose I do not know."

"I do," Malicia said. "And I trusted your apprentice to unmake that plan."

"She needs to die," Amadeus said bluntly. "Loudly, badly, publicly. I don't understand why she's still alive at this point. We've done worse to people of blood as old for lesser offences."

The Dread Empress of Praes took the bottle and brought it to her lips. She drank for a long time, and when she leaned back against the pillar her smile was a dark thing.

"It's not about Heiress, Maddie," she said. "It never was. It's about her mother."

Amadeus' brow rose, but he did not interrupt.

"Tasia Sahelian," Alaya spoke, relishing the words. "High Lady of Wolof. A tick, Maddie. A tick I could not get rid of, and who bound others to her schemes. And now I am about to *break* her."

A game that broad would have had surface stirrings, Amadeus knew, and calmly his mind revised every major event to have happened in the last five years in the light of what she had just said.

"The gold," he said after a long moment. "The reparations you levied on her – you knew she'd pay. You never thought it would make her withdraw the orc tribute petition."

"One move at a time, for the last decade, I have slowly emptied her coffers," Alaya said, still smiling. "Inconsequential laws she paid the fine to break. Tariffs raised on goods she needed. Bribes offered she needed to match. And down went the treasure of Wolof, one aurelius at a time."

"She still *has* coin," Amadeus said. "Her network of spies has not been reduced and her subversions in the bureaucracy continue."

"Oh, she has coin," Dread Empress Malicia murmured. "Silver, to be exact."

Amadeus' eyes sharpened. "Procer. I thought you'd cut off the flow."

"I did not," Alaya said. "And now she is dependent on it so stay above the waterl. Her overextension will reach a peak when she sinks a fortune into restoring Liesse – whose infrastructure, I am afraid, is about to collapse."

The dark-skinned woman put down the bottle on the floor, and the cold clink of it was like an executioner's axe.

"And then the silver will stop."

That would end her, Amadeus knew. The loss of face when she had to publicly default on the many commitments she'd made would shatter any credibility with the rest of the nobility. Her own family would rise in revolt to remove her. It would go further than that though.

"The Truebloods," he said.

"Will, within a year, end as a political entity in the Empire," she said softly.

Because Heiress, emboldened by her continued toeing of the line going unpunished, would make another mistake. Give Malicia another lever to pry apart the Truebloods and deal with them individually. *The Reforms could begin again*, he thought, but those promised skies were too sunny. In the Wasteland, that was always the prelude to the worst of storms.

"If Tasia is willing to take those risks," he said, "it means that her end game can be reached within a year."

"That is my assessment," she agreed.

He closed his eyes. Liesse, it all came back to Liesse. That had been the prize mother and daughter both had wanted out of the rebellion, and not merely to steal some taxes.

"Heiress," he said. "She has a different plan. What is it?"

There was a long moment of silence, marred only by the patter of the rain outside.

"Do you trust me?" Alaya said.

A year ago, he thought, you would not have needed to ask. A year ago, though, he would not have pressed for answers in the first place. Four words she had spoken, with so many deeper meanings behind them. After all these years, she was saying, after all the times we have hurt each other without knowing or being allowed to let it stay our hand, do you still believe in this? What we have built, the two of us. All the sacrifices we made, the choices we bloodied ours hands with, do you regret them? Even though the chasm is deep and the way across long, though the darkness is thick and we are both so, so tired – will you make that leap of

faith again, if I ask you? Amadeus closed his eyes, and leaned back against the pillar. Gently, he threaded his fingers through Alaya's.

"Always," he said.

Because he was the Black Knight and she was the Dread Empress, and together they had twisted the strands of Fate until they snapped. Because he was Amadeus and she was Alaya, and though the children they'd once been were long dead the dreams they'd woven together under starlight were not. She rested her head against his shoulder, and for a long time they did not speak.

"A 'jolly good time'," she eventually said.

He snorted. The Tyrant of Helike's words as he threw the south-east of the continent into sheer bloody chaos.

"One day," Alaya continued, "we will have foreign allies who are not complete imbeciles. By sheer dint of odds, it has to happen *eventually*."

"That'd be the day," Amadeus said wistfully. "But until then..."

"Even if the heroes come," she said.

"Even if the angels rage," he said.

"Even if all of Creation stands against us"

"We'll *win*," they whispered.

In the distance, thunder rumbled.

Neither of them flinched.

—

Akua Sahelian let the sorcery seep into her body. Old stones from the first foundations of Wolof, having drunk deep of the ancient magic there, surrounded her in an unbroken circle. Turning the power within them to the purposes of healing had been the work of an afternoon, one of the first tricks with high arcana her father had ever taught her. The sorcery came and went in tides a perfect match for her heartbeat, alone in the warded room she'd had prepared in the lower levels of the ducal palace of Liesse. She would have to sit there on her chair of lightning-struck oak for a full bell to finish healing the last of the wounds inflicted on her, so Heiress closed her eyes and thought. Sleep would have been so very restful, but it was no longer the kind of luxury she could afford. Not now, when here plans truly began. Not now, when the enemy prowled around her seat of power in search of weakness.

Foundling has unleashed her twisted little goblin again, the one with the thief's name. The wretch was officially out on manoeuvres, but he'd really been haunting the roads in and out of Liesse. There'd been no lack of targets: even after her loss of face, Heiress' allies were legion. They were coming to her city now, flocking to make a darker mirror to the Empress' court in Ater. Not all of them made it: twice already an entire party had disappeared without trace in the night. Both of them had been headed by members in good standing – if not high authority – of the Truebloods. Aisha Bishara was picking the prey, she knew, surgically removing the most reliable of Akua's allies before they ever made it to the protection of her walls. It wouldn't be enough: word has spread and now the Praesi were coming in larger, heavily armed groups. More than a single cohort of goblins, however brutal, could handle.

Not for the first time in the last moon's turn, Heiress' thoughts turned to the city she ruled over. To the battle that had taken place there and the infinitely more important events that had unfolded behind it. She could admit it, in the perfect privacy of her own thoughts.

Liesse had been a disaster.

Out of her ten-odd objectives when the Fifteenth had left Marchford, only one had been met. Forcing support for her bid as governess. That was it. As for the others? The Hashmallim, instead of being trapped in a dimension she owned as fuel for the next part of her plan, had been essentially bullied into resurrecting Foundling. *Resurrection*. The sheer effrontery of that, she reluctantly had to respect. The Squire was still an ignorant thug, but she was an ignorant thug who'd spat in the eye of the Heavens. A little of what it meant to be Praesi had sunk into Catherine Foundling, whether or not the other woman wanted to admit it. The Lone Swordsman was dead, as she had wished, but his death had empowered the Squire in ways she could not yet fully understand. Far from weakening her rival, the killing had added another blade to her arsenal.

The devils she'd meant to use to thin the population of Liesse – to spill so much blood the grounds would be consecrated to the Gods Below, to flush out the rebels and make room for her coming allies – had been turned on themselves within half a bell of being unleashed. The sheer amount of contracts she'd permanently lost through that was painful to think about. The demon she'd secured as the blunt tool she would occasionally need? Now in the hands of the Apprentice, the same man who'd turned her bindings into a meat grinder as easily as pouring himself a cup of wine. Had she been the kind of woman who shivered in fear, Akua would have at that. The son of Warlock with a demon dating from Triumphant's – may she never return – day in his hands was not a notion she cherished. Another asset lost. If she could have

turned Masego to her purposes the problem would not have been quite as keen, but she had no angle there.

Apprentice had, as far as she could tell, no real vices. He did not drink much, ate often but of peasant fare and socialized but with a few people – all of them either family or members of the Fifteenth. It had been mildly interesting to learn he played shatranj with the Adjutant and talked spellcrafting with the Duni Senior Mage, but there was no *lever* there. Sex was similarly useless as an approach: as far as she knew Masego had never lain with either a man or a woman, or even shown interest in either. She had agents of both genders do everything but show up in his bedroll naked and the man hadn't even noticed, most of the time. Frustrating, especially since Apprentice was the only of Foundling's Named contingent it was even slightly possible to bring to her side. Trying that with the orc was a fool's errand. Heiress did not sigh, even in this room where no one could hear or see. Apprentice would be building his mage's tower soon, she knew. Perhaps he could be tempted with exotic materials or test subjects. It could hardly be a worse failure than the seductions, anyway.

Akua knew she should not be focusing on Foundling, not when she had so many more pressing matters to attend, but her thoughts seemed unwilling to abandon the Battle of Liesse. That some of her objectives would not be met, she had expected. It was inevitable. But a failure of such magnitude?

Foundling had ripped her way through one contingency after another, quipping even as a walking corpse. An entire host of devils, neutered then slain. The Lone Swordsman, lured into her path, beaten bloody and then tricked into ending his pattern of three. Her burning of the only way into the church had barely slowed her down, and there was Chider. Chider had been her trump card, her assured victory. Stealing the Name of Squire had been certain to work as long as she was owed a victory against Foundling, and had. And given her an aspect more dangerous than ever before, not to mention restored the fullness of the Name. She hadn't *known*, that the demon had crippled the Name. Her spies in the Fifteenth had not reported as much on the walk to Liesse. There would be a reckoning for that failure yet. Chider had always been supposed to die permanently, either at Foundling's hand or Lord Black's, but for her to be disposed of faster than you take a bath?

No, that had not been part of the plan.

By dying, Foundling had inserted a flaw into Akua's plan. The ripping of the Name should have incapacitated her for hours, *would* have if she'd not been a corpse, and so bought Heiress the time she needed to deal with the Lone Swordsman and imprison the angel. An ironclad victory had been wasted on a matter that had

ultimately proved trifling, and there would be no second pattern of three. Creation did not embrace such tedious repetitions. The work of two years had been wasted: provoking Foundling and then fleeing on the Blessed Isle, the messy draw at Marchford... Akua had spent much time to guarantee herself a victory when she needed it most only to find that triumph utterly empty. It was enough to make her blood boil.

And there had been that final conversation, in that dinky little room where her companions had been turned into bargaining chips under her own nose. When Ghassan's soul had been ripped from his body as Foundling sat quietly next to her, forcing her to watch. *And this time there will be no bargaining to save you*, Foundling had said. There had been something in Squire's eyes, when she'd said that... Akua Sahelian had been raised among people who killed for sport and bound the very denizens of Hell to their will, but what she had seen there had made her flinch. She'd asked her mother, once, why her hatred for the Dread Empress ran so deep. Why it was so personal. *I met her eyes, when I surrendered*, Mother had said. *And what I saw there scared me*. Heiress understood, now, how that single moment could consume someone. She remembered the calm implacable certainty in the Callowan's dark eyes and felt her hand tremble, if only for a moment.

She could not concentrate on Foundling. Squire was the brazier she'd lit so everyone would watch the flames and ignore the knife. *Killing* Foundling had never been her purpose. The results of that would have been disastrous: Akua would have become the slated successor of the Black Knight, the last thing she wanted. Dealing with Lord Black from anything but a position of power would be... dangerous, to say the least. Heiress' game had always been with greater opponents, and the rivalry with Foundling had served as an apt smokescreen for it. There were only two people in Praes who could stop her: Dread Empress Malicia, First of her Name, and Tasia Sahelian. For all her failures she had, after all, gotten what she needed from the rebellion. The first prize was Liesse. Deep in the south of Callow, where the Empress' reach was weaker and old sorcery was woven into the walls. There was power there, power that could turn the work of decades into the work of months.

The second prize, the most important, was a story. *Heiress uses devils. Heiress uses demons. Binds them, commands them, makes them her own*. She was just starting to be known in the Empire, and already her Name was fundamentally intertwined with diabolism in all the stories. That was the deeper plan, the masterpiece she had crafted over the years. The Name of Heiress after all, was in many ways inferior to that of Squire. It strengthened her body and her sorcery, but not as well as her 'rival's' did. The applications of it were perhaps a better fit for her, allowing her to manipulate and deceive with a deftness beyond her years, but when it came to combat it was flatly outmatched. That much

had been made clear in Liesse. Both were transitional Names meant to lead into something else, but Squires were bound to become Knights. A Heiress, though? A Heiress could become anything.

Heiress uses devils. Heiress uses demons. The worst of diabolists.

Already she was beginning to transition, and the moment she did she could finally put all the forces in motion. Begin crafting the key to the cage, the way out of the trap she had been bound by since her birth. A year, that was all she needed.

A year and she would change Creation.

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The Wandering Bard, lately Almorava of Smyrna, sat on a stone by moonlight and idly strummed her lute.

It made a noise like a chorus of cats drowning. The sound was made all the more jarring by the fact that she had not, until that moment, existed then and there. Or since the Battle of Liesse, really. She'd watched from a distance as William killed the Squire and known what it meant. That the Lone Swordsman had lost, that Liesse was lost, that the rebellion was over. There had been no need to linger, and she'd not had the heart to watch William die. Whether or not he had deserved better was debatable but he had *tried*. Badly and often in ways that were misguided, but he had been trying to do good. It was a shame, that his story had never been going to end well. William of Greenbury would have been a very different man, in ten years. She knew this because she could feel the shape his story would have taken with her fingertips, if he had somehow managed to pass the hurdle that was Catherine Foundling and all the monsters behind her. It was not to be. Contrition used its heroes until they broke, and in breaking parted the clouds to allow the shine of the sun to triumph.

It was sordid, the Bard felt.

She would write a song for him, one day. One worth singing. But she would not do so tonight. The death was too fresh, rawer than she had thought it would be, and William had never been the sort to sing. He'd been a man of thought and silences. Of impatience and recklessness as well, but in some stories those same traits were called boldness and courage. It was always about what you made of it, and in the Lone Swordsman there had been surprisingly much to make of. Dropping the lute on the mossy green earth, the Bard fished out a bottle of her haversack and popped it open. She sniffed. It smelled like anise. Gods, it was a bottle of that foul fig distillate Ashurans were so fond of, wasn't it? Of the many sins the Baalite Hegemony had to answer for, bringing this abomination over the Tyrian Sea was undoubtedly one of the worst.

She had a drink anyway. It burned on the way down, warmed her and reminded her she was alive. That was always a comfort after she'd had a Wander.

She was currently sitting within a stone's throw of the walls of Liesse, which told her exactly what was about to happen. How much time had passed she couldn't be sure, but there was only one plot thread left dangling. They must have taken their time, she frowned, eyeing the now-pristine walls. Heiress must have been governess for at least a moon's turn. Likely they would be arriving at exactly the right moment to hit the hardest, having followed the instructions there were given to the letter. To the number of heartbeats passed, even. The Bard drank from her disgusting trial of a bottle again. Her teeth were starting to taste like anise and an ever-expanding alcohol problem.

"You might as well come out, boys," she called out. "You're not fooling anyone."

The elves did not appear, because appearing had the implication they had not been previously there. They had been, they'd just decided that Creation would not be able to see them. That was the way with the older elves: they decided what rules applied to them. They could not ignore more than one, but that was usually enough. Besides, she would not put anything past these two: they had been old before they'd ever set foot on Calernian soil. Few people would have called the two Emerald Swords beautiful, she decided. By the standards of humans their faces were too long and angular, their skin so perfect as to seem almost marble and those wide eyes filled with so much contempt it was nearly a physical thing. They were tall and slim and terrible to behold, like a coldly shining star. The one on the left was called Dawn and the other Dusk. They were both men, not that she could have figured it out from looking at them if she had not already known. The Bard let out an obnoxious whistle.

"Two Emerald Swords, huh?" she said. "The Forever King *really* wants her dead."

They did not reply with words. Infinitesimal twitches, impossible for anyone but a Named to notice, served as an exchange between the elves. *Obstacle*, Dawn said. *Unforeseen*, Dusk added, deeply offended.

"He's a bargain bin prophet, your man," the Bard snorted. "He thinks a crown and a few dreams means he can read the weaves? *Please*."

Sharp and ugly fury erupted in both of them without changing them in the slightest. *Kill*, Dusk said. *Hero*, Dawn reluctantly disagreed.

"Them's the rules," the Bard said. "Can't touch a hair on my head so long as your King doesn't give permission. And he would have needed to see me coming for that."

She guzzled down more of that sin against the Heavens, allowing some of it to trickle down her chin. She wiped it off messily. Disgust twitched across their frames. It was almost too easy to toy with them, really.

"You're going to use words to talk to me," she said. "If you don't, I'll just have to start speaking elvish – or what's that fancy name you folks give it again? The True Tongue?"

"Your language is carrion," Dawn said in Lower Miezán, as she'd known he would. "I will need to rip out my tongue after soiling it so."

However soiling the act of speaking a language not elvish, it would have been nothing to having a mere human speak their precious True Tongue. Even a hero.

"You're such charmers, you lot," the Bard drawled. "You know, I had high hopes for your kind when you first arrived."

She gestured expansively.

"Armada of white ships lands under the Everdark, pretty little elves burn it immediately. You go into the woods and genocide your way through the Deoraithe until you own the land. I told myself 'old girl, these ones mean business'."

She grinned sharply.

"But then you stayed in your Golden Bloom, didn't you? Closed the borders and ignored the rest of the continent. That was a disappointment, let me tell you. You had such *potential*."

"The affairs of mortals are of no interest to the elves," Dawn said.

There was no intonation or inflection to the words. They were just spoken, as if by a being made of stone. The Emerald Sword could be made to speak a human language but not bother with the frills of it.

"Not *you* elves, anyway," the Bard said. "It's why they kicked you out, isn't it? The others. The ones that breed with humans, whose kingdom is larger than this entire continent. Lots of room there, but not enough to fit your *opinions* about lesser races."

"The Kingdom of the Golden Bloom will remain forever unmarred," Dawn said.

"Oh, sure. Pure, pretty as a painting, all that good stuff."

The Bard paused, then smiled.

"Shame about that birth rate, though, no? How many kids you popped since coming here again?"

None, they all knew the answer was. That was what happened when you murdered the original owners of a forest and tried to claim it your own. It remembered, and no amount of singing to the trees was ever going to fix that.

"We know who you are, Keeper of Stories," Dawn said. "She of a Thousand Faces. Speak your piece."

"I hadn't heard that one in a *long* time," the Bard chuckled. "Keeper of Stories, eh? Just doesn't sound the same in Lower Miezán. I go by the Wandering Bards, these days."

They did not reply. They saw no further need to indulge her, she realized with amusement. She gulped down another chunk of her horrible, horrible liquor.

"The Forever Twit sent you to knock off the Heiress," she said. "Not happening. Fuck off."

The wooden sword had bit deep into the stone, less than hair's breadth away from her femoral artery. She'd never even seen Dusk move, and as far as she could tell he was still standing where he'd always been. The only difference was the absence of the spellwood sword at his hip.

"Do not," Dawn said, "mock Him again."

"You lot developed a temper in your old age," the Bard grinned. "It's almost cute, the way you think *violence* is something that could scare me."

She'd accented the word in Lower Miezán the same way it would have been in elvish. It was enough to horrify the both of them.

"You know what she intends," Dawn said.

"Better than either of you, or the man who holds your leashes," the Bard said. "But you know what really ruffles my feathers, Dawnie? That he thinks he has a right to *meddle*."

Her voice had gone cold. They were both wary now.

"'cause the way I see it," she continued, "you signed that away long ago. Around the time Triumphant was kicking around. Remember Triumphant? Lass about wee high-"

She waved her bottle around, spilling some on her sleeve.

"- scowled all the time, conquered the continent? Any of that ring a bell? Around the time she took Callow, she turned her eyes to the Golden Bloom. And what did you bunch of rabbit-eared sissies do then?"

She paused.

"Anyone? Seriously, it's not like you two weren't around."

She sighed.

"You bailed out of Creation is what you did," she said. "You took your pretty little kingdom and fled right into Arcadia. And boy, was she *pissed* when she realized it. Wiped out two cities in rage."

The Bard drank again, loosely sprawled on the stone. She knocked down the lute by accident and did not bother to pick it up.

"And now you think you get to cut away the part of the story you don't like," she said. "Really, the nerve of some people."

The Wandering Bard grinned nastily, the white cut of her teeth like a slice of sharp moonlight.

"*This is my game*," she hissed. "Amateurs are not allowed."

She leaned forward.

"Crawl back to your forest, Emerald Swords," she said. "And tell your owner that if he ever tries anything like this again, he will rue the day."

Neither of the elves moved.

"I will not," the Bard said softly, "warn you again."

And just like that they were gone. As if they had never been here at all. The sword was gone, the stone it had cut completely untouched. Almorava of Smyrna sighed, and looked at the stars. She finished her bottle, and she died.

The Wandering Bard opened her eyes in a crowded tavern room. People spoke all around her, not a single one of them looking in her direction. She sitting alone at a table in the back. She looked at her hands, surprised not to see any wrinkles. Young twice in a row? That was rare. She was definitely getting laid in this one, it just felt *better* when you were still young. Her skin was of a pale tan, the appearance of most hailing from the Free Cities. Who was she?

Aoede of Nicae.

It had a ring to it. And she got tits, this time! An improvement. Almorava had been a disappointment in that regard. Hair was a bit long and too curly for her tastes, but she'd made do with worse. Aoede's leathers still smelled of anise and threats, but that was part of her charm really. She passed by the bar, snatching the bottle of liquor a dark-haired man had in front of him and then stealing a cup to pour herself a drink. The man in question was passed out, and she clucked her tongue disapprovingly. Not only was this a lightweight move, by the looks of the sun it couldn't be past noon. The man behind the bartop shot her an amused look.

"That stuff will kill you, sister," he said in tradertalk.

Aoede smiled.

"Son," she said, "I've got more lives than a bag of cats."

Keeping the bottle, if not the cup, she strode out into the sun. The White Knight was bound to be close, or she wouldn't be there. Contrition, in the end, had not done the trick.

Maybe Judgement would.