

# Book 3

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## Prologue

*"The most dangerous opponent for a master is a novice. Therefore, seek to be a novice in all things."*

– Isabella the Mad, only general to ever defeat Theodosius the Unconquered on the field

Anaxares, to his surprise, was still alive.

Perhaps his utter irrelevance in the grand scheme of things had seen him spared, he pondered, but such a thought was too optimistic. More likely the *kanenas* had all assumed another one of them was going to trigger the stone in his stomach and one would get around to it whenever they remembered. His impending death was such a certainty he no longer spared any time troubling himself over it – what point was there in cursing the river when you were already drowning? At the very least his last days would be interesting, in a truly horrifying manner. The Tyrant of Helike had seemingly adopted him as a pet of sorts, naming him an official advisor to the crown and now dragged him along wherever he went. The villain was amused by his calm. Calling the contraption the two of them were currently on a litter would have been a misnomer: the boy had essentially built a massive dais, slapped a throne on it and now had it carried around by porters everywhere.

A pavilion could be added to cover the surface when weather demanded as much and tables were positioned to allow for the taking of a meal should the Tyrant demand it. The wretched labour involved offended his sensibilities. *Foreign Slavers Will Be Known By Their Wicked Works*, he added out of habit. *May They All Choke On Ashes And Also Snakes*. The villain had tried to have a smaller, noticeably cheaper throne put next to his for Anaxares to sit on but the Bellerophan had flatly refused. He'd claimed a wooden stool for the people and discreetly carved the sigil of Bellerophon – three peasants waving pitchforks – on the side. The small act of rebellion had been deeply satisfying, if utterly meaningless. Not, he decided, an inept description of his own existence.

*"Finally,"* the Tyrant said, *"we're getting decent weather."*

Anaxares looked up at the massive storm clouds gathering and cocked an eyebrow. The lands between Helike and Atalante were known for the occasional bouts of week-long rain and storms, blown south from the Waning Woods and the madness that passed for

nature over there. The Fae toyed with the winds and the sky the way men did with their clothes, and the farms beneath them paid the price.

"It will be harder for your army to retreat in the mud," Anaxares said.

He knew next to nothing about strategy – in Bellerophon the only people allowed to read books on the subject were the citizens who drew army positions, and even they had the knowledge erased from their minds past their term of service lest they Use It In Horrid Rebellion Against The People – but so far the Tyrant's campaign against Atalante had not impressed him. For one, there'd been no battles. The famous Helikean army had marched east towards Atalante, whose farmers had already emptied their fields, without contest from the enemy. The Atalantians had remained behind their walls as the emptied their treasury buying up all the mercenaries in Mercantis they could afford, only taking the field after they outnumbered the Helikeans two to one. Twenty thousand men had then dutifully marched towards the Tyrant, who had immediately taken his army back through the farmlands he'd just gleefully set fire to.

"Oh, we're done retreating," the Tyrant said cheerfully. "I'm bored with it now. Got what I need anyway."

Anaxares pulled at his third wineskin of the morning, trying to wash down the taste of impending doom. The Tyrant disapproved vocally of his drinking habits, but the man's servants kept bringing him skins anyway.

"As my advisor," the boy said, his bad hand visibly shaking, "what would you advise me to do now?"

Just being called that qualified Anaxares for thirty-three different counts of treason by Bellerophon law. Fifty-something, even, if you counted all the articles about foreign collusion separately. His remains would be on trial for years after the initial execution.

"Return to Helike, slit your own throat and let your replacement beg the mercy of the League," he replied without missing a beat.

"You're a terrible advisor," the Tyrant complained. "I should have you hanged."

Anaxares shrugged.

"If that is your wish."

Less painful of a way to go than internal organ crushing, he assessed.

"You haven't gotten tedious yet," the boy mused. "I guess you can live."

"I am, of course, relieved and grateful," the Bellerophan deadpanned.

"You should be," the Tyrant said cheerfully. "I'm so merciful, it's why my people love me so much."

As far as Anaxares could tell, the reason Helikeans 'loved' the Tyrant was that they had been told they did by men with swords and grim faces. The army, though, did seem genuinely loyal. Not surprising: whenever a Tyrant took the throne, they started invading everything in sight. The last one to hold the Name had broken the desperate alliance of Stygia, Atalante and Delos before the southern Proceran princes had intervened and put her down. Glorious war had been waged, victories tallied, and within a decade all the borders had returned to what they'd been before the woman had claimed the crown. Named or not, one could not change the face of the Free Cities.

"Admittedly there is no other claimant to the throne, since your nephew's death," the diplomat said instead of rehashing the histories.

"Pretty idiot got himself shot by an orc, of all things," the Tyrant said delightedly, the red in his eye deepening for a heartbeat. "He always talked too much, it's how he lost the throne in the first place."

The Bellerophan's eyes sharpened with interest as he swallowed another mouthful of wine. The Tyrant's seizing of the throne of Helike had been one of the most unexpected diplomatic developments of the last decade, in the Free Cities, but precious little was known about. A boy that had been by all reports a nonentity before the coup had in a single day taken control of the city and the army, killed the king in his own bed and purged his nephew's supporters brutally. The nephew in question had fled the city with most of the young nobility and his surviving loyalists, becoming the Exiled Prince in the process.

"Talked too much," Anaxares repeated, leaving the tone questioning.

"See, Dorian's father was a lot like mine," the Tyrant said. "Drank too much, dallied with servants, let the nobility and the army run things. Everybody liked that state of affairs. Dorian, though? He was just so *pretty* and so *good*."

The bitter hatred in those words almost fouled the air.

"Now, the old guard didn't care much for him. But their heirs? The swarmed him like flies a corpse. Hung on to his every word, his promises of reform and a better Helike."

The Tyrant seemed almost amused at the prospect of the betterment of his city-state, as if such a thing was unimaginable.

"They figured out eventually that when Dorian took the throne, he was going to be *an actual ruler*," he snickered. "Their own children would back him in this. Now that angered them quite a bit, Anaxares. If you steal power and keep it for long enough, eventually you start to think you have a right to it."

He waved his good hand expansively.

"So they looked at the only other child of royal blood," he said. "Approached me. And I said: *why not?*"

"They thought they could rule through you," the diplomat said. "A mistake of some scale."

"Most of the I fed to dogs," the Tyrant smiled, that flash of sharp pearly teeth. "The others fell in line."

"You were twelve years old," Anaxares said, feeling old. "And already Named."

"I wasn't the Tyrant then," the boy said. "Just Kairos. Can you keep a secret, advisor?"

"No," the diplomat replied immediately. "I will report everything you say to the *kanenas* at the first opportunity, before my summary execution."

The villain grinned.

"Treachery is pleasing to the Gods Below," he said. "There's a crypt in Helike, under the palace, where the first foundations of the city were laid. There's a creature there, lying under a tomb of stone sculpted to look like someone holding a sword. There is a crack in the side just large enough that you can hear the thing inside whisper, if you press your ear to it."

Anaxares would have shivered, if years of walking with death in his belly had not effectively burned fear out of him. The words were casually spoken but the description felt more vivid than it should have. He could smell the dusty air, feel the unsettling whisper of an abomination against his ear.

"I don't know what it is. My father said it's the first king of Helike, still straddling the line between life and death," the Tyrant said. "The king, though, once said it is the god who once owned the ground the city was built on – tricked into the tomb and forever bound to give us advice."

"Advice?" the diplomat repeated.

"Prophecies," the boy said. "All of royal blood can ask one question if it, in our lifetime."

"And it told you you would rule?" Anaxares guessed.

The Tyrant laughed.

"It told me," he said, "that I would die when I turned thirteen. That there was nothing I could do to change this."

The boy smiled.

"It was," he said, "a great gift."

Looking down at his shaking hand, the Tyrant seemed lost in memory for a moment before he gathered himself.

"We spend so much of our lives, Anaxares, shackling ourselves. Avoiding doing this and that because others would frown upon it. Because it is wrong and wicked and unworthy. Once I knew there was only death ahead of me, I started doing what *I* wanted. I ceased censuring what I was to please others."

"The drow believed the same as you, when they embraced the Tenets of Night," the Bellerophon said. "And look at them now, Tyrant – packs of savages inhabiting the ruins of an empire. Censure Is Just, Law Is Necessary."

*Glory To Peerless Bellerophon, Whose Laws Are That Of The People,* he added silently.

"Your city is the mutilated remains of a people," the boy said. "That you wielded the knife yourself is the only thing setting you apart from the rest of Creation."

"We have no rulers, in Bellerophon," Anaxares said.

This time there was no need for him to speak the words taught to all of them as children, the capitalized praises learned before one could walk. This, he believed for himself. Because the Republic was flawed, deeply flawed, and he could admit this to himself even if he deserved death for it. But what it stood for was... greater than the sum of its faults.

"No crowns. No nobles. No Names. This is not an accident, Helikean, it is a *statement*. We are all of us free or we are none of us free. There is no middle ground."

"You've lived a heartbeat away from death all your life," the Tyrant said, "and still you don't quite get it, do you? You Bellerophans just traded one tyrant for fifty thousand. You don't get to decide who you are. Others do that for you."

The boy rose to his feet, stretching out gingerly. He looked almost fragile, thin and sickly under his red silken robes.

"When those nobles and generals came to whisper treason in my ear," he said, "I did not hesitate. Because I felt like usurping a throne, because I hated Dorian. I was curious to see if it could be done. I was going to die soon, anyway, and what did I care what followed that?"

Anaxares was not a warrior, or a large man. He was thirty and more familiar with wine than a hard day's work. For all that, looking at the boy, for a moment he was convinced he could snap his neck almost without effort. That the bones would break like a bird's, shatter like glass. Then he saw the eye, the damnable red eye, and the Tyrant was a looming titan looking down on him.

"So I did it," the boy hissed. "I crushed them and I stole the crown and I called the would-be puppeteers to heel. And when I turned thirteen, sitting on my throne as the Tyrant of Helike – *I did not die*. Because Fate isn't a path we must follow, Anaxares, it's a tug-of-war between the Gods."

He leaned closer.

"And sometimes, if you put your hands to the rope, you can tug it your way," he whispered.

The Named withdrew with unnatural agility, laughing. The intensity there had been to him was gone like mist in the sun. The Tyrant ripped out one of the banners that flew at every corner of his dais – his personal heraldry, a leering skull with a red eye on gold – and leapt down onto the wet grounds. The porters who'd been carrying the dais hastily slowed, not daring to drop the entire thing even as their muscles creaked lest their ruler be splattered with mud.

"Come along, advisor," the boy said. "We must speak with my general."

Anaxares followed. The soldiers, hard men and women in scale armour with swords and shield, turned into awed children whenever they saw the Tyrant. Some reached hesitantly for the hem of his silks, which the boy tolerantly allowed. There was no sign of discontent among them even after the pantomime that had been this campaign: in Helike, Tyrants did not fail. Not without betrayal or half the world set against them. They would follow the little madman into the fray without hesitation or doubt. The general they were seeking found them first, riding towards them. A woman, the diplomat saw, then his gaze lingered on her throat. Not that she had always been that.

"Sire," the general said, dismounting hastily and kneeling.

"General Basilia," the Tyrant said, patting her armoured shoulder affectionately. "The army is to cease retreating immediately."

Something feral flashed in the woman's eyes.

"We are to prepare for battle, then? The enemy is half a day's march away, we can still set the grounds."

The Named chuckled.

"There is no need to array our soldiers for a fight," he said. "Stay in a column. We will be marching on Atalante before nightfall."

She almost hesitated, Anaxares saw, but did not protest. Loyal, this one. To a boy more than half mad. Gods save them all. He should have brought the wine.

"As you command, sire," she said. "There is a farm not far from here, should I prepare it to accommodate you?"

"No need," the Tyrant said. "My advisor and I will be awaiting our friends on the field."

Without even the semblance of an explication, the boy strode away with the standard resting on his shoulder. The diplomat sighed and made to follow but he was stopped by the general, who put a gauntleted hand on his shoulder. She glared down at him.

"If he dies," General Basilia said, "you will follow him shortly. *Screaming.*"

"Nine," Anaxares replied.

"What?" she said.

"The number of times I've been threatened with death today," the diplomat clarified. "Will we make it to ten before noon? It is an auspicious number, in Bellerophon."

He strode away after that, while she was still too surprised to protest. He found the Tyrant alone in a sprawling field of grass, gazing ahead. The boy hummed, as he approached.

"And now?" the diplomat asked.

"Now we wait," the Tyrant said.

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It was mid-afternoon when the forces of Atalante arrived.

They were a sorry bunch to look at, compared to the soldiers of Helike. Citizen levies armed with spears and shields and decked

in hardened leather, city and caravan guards who'd traded cudgels for swords, unarmoured conscripts with javelins and slings. Only the cavalry looked professional, nobles with long lances and chain mail. The mercenaries looked more fearsome, infantry from all parts of Calernia that dwelled in the mercenary villages surrounding the shores of Mercantis until hired by patrons. There were Ashurans there, he saw, with their curved bows and ornate armours. Levantines with painted faces and hooked swords, even Callowan knights with long banners who must have survived the Praesi purges. Behind him, the army of Helike remained in an orderly column and did not move. The commanders on the other side ordered a halt, but after most of an hour passed without anyone moving orders began being screamed along the Atalantian lines. In good order, the enemy began to advance again.

"They're not even sending an envoy to talk with me," the Tyrant complained.

"You murdered the last one," Anaxares said.

"It's still very rude," the boy said, rolling the wooden shaft of the standard between his palms. "They ought to have better manners than that."

The diplomat watched twenty thousand soldiers marching in his direction and wondered which one would kill him. Hopefully one with a sword. Spear wounds tended to kill slowly, he'd been told, unless something important was pierced.

"Last night, Malicia's hounds set foot in Penthes," the Tyrant said conversationally.

"May The Ground Open Up To Swallow The Base Penthesians," Anaxares replied out of habit.

"The city will be eating itself alive before a fortnight has passed," he said. "Nicae won't move until they've grown fat with Proceran silver and 'mercenaries', Delos will be dealing with the Stygian phalanx moving north. That leaves only our dear Atalantian friends and their escorts."

"Who you have decided to fight," the diplomat said. "Without your army."

"Oh, I could have had General Basilia tear those poor fools alive, if you'll forgive my language," the Tyrant said. "It wouldn't even have been very hard. That's how the Praesi do things, nowadays. Let tactics and preparation carry the day."

The frail boy's lips curled in distaste.

"And to think they were once the greatest among us."



"The Dread Empire is the most powerful it has been in centuries," Anaxares frowned.

"And their Empress plays shatranj with the First Prince across an entire continent, winning more often than not," the Named said. "For all that, they've lost their way."

The Bellerophan raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"It's not about winning, Anaxares," the Tyrant said. "It's about *how* you win."

The standard rolled again between the boy's palms as the enemy host crept ever closer.

"Even now, if I gave General Basilia the order I believe she could win this. It would be a victory, yes, but would it be a victory for Evil?"

"You are a villain," the Bellerophan said. "A victory for you is a victory for Evil."

"A mere clash between armies? No," he said. "It takes more than that. The war I am fighting has little to do with steel: I am soldier for the Gods Below in the game that will settle Creation. A point has to be made, a sense to the story."

"And what is the point of us standing on this field, watching death arrive?" Anaxares asked.

"Twenty thousand men march to end me," the Tyrant said. "They will break, because they are in my way. Watch, diplomat, and learn."

The boy drove the standard into the ground, flying his banner of one in the face of the host that spread across the plain.

"I am Kairos Theodosian," he laughed. "Tyrant of Helike. And I say that my **Rule** extends to even the sky. Come, servants of the Heavens. The Age of Wonders is not dead yet. *Not while I breathe.*"

The cloud above thickened, more black than grey now. For a long moment nothing happened, and then lightning struck the soldiers of Atalante. Thunder clapped, the sky danced to the whims of a madman and Anaxares watched the largest army he had ever seen break apart at the seams. The Tyrant of Helike stood there, smiling.

His hand no longer shook.

# Chapter 1: Right

*"Do not make laws you do not intend to enforce. Allowing one law to be broken with impunity undermines them all."*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

Evening Bell had just rung and the room was now lit with candles.

Most of the Southpool eldersmen – the ones involved in my little visit, anyway – had extended invitations for me to stay in their own homes, but I had politely declined. Governess Ife would have those under watch, for the first time in years. After the Conquest eldersmen assemblies had been made toothless by the near-absolute powers granted to Imperial governors, an abrupt fall for men and women who had once been a power to rival the guilds and the nobility. Their newfound irrelevance had allowed them to survive the discreet purges that had gone through all cities under direct Praesi occupation, which the governors were only now learning had been a mistake. A mistake driven by culture, as it happened. There was no equivalent to eldersmen in the Wasteland, where power inside the larger cities was always in the sole hands of the ruling High Lord. Black had apparently been of the opinion that time would smother the institution on its own without any need for blood: Callowans born without having ever known the assemblies would not be inclined to defer to them, particularly when their old powers were in the hands of others.

He'd only been half-right. In Laure – where the guilds and House Fairfax had always been much stronger – the assemblies were already dead and buried before I was born. In Southpool, though, it was a different story. The Counts of Southpool had long been weakened by their proximity to the seat of a beloved monarchy, and the city was not strong enough in trade for the guilds to have a major presence. Governess Ife, now on her third mandate ruling the city, had found the opposition to several of her toll stations and extraordinary taxes to be strong and exceedingly well-organized. There had been riots, and at first she'd backed down after manoeuvring so the manner of it would not make her lose face. Then she'd quietly begun eliminating the most respected of the eldersmen, breaking the assembly's influence one corpse at a time. Like most forms of Callowan resistance after the Conquest, the enterprise had been doomed from the start. The eldersmen of Southpool were now a pale shadow of what they'd once been, unable to mount any opposition worth the name.

But oh, they *wanted* to.

When I'd had Ratface contact them through intermediaries, they'd accepted my offer without even listening to all the terms. They

were lucky I wasn't out to screw them, because it would have been child's play. I wasn't exactly a great admirer of eldermen assemblies – the way eldermen were appointed by the vote of other eldermen made them too much like a knock-off nobility for my tastes – but I needed a check on the authority of governors and they were my most palatable option. It was better than letting the guilds have the reins, anyway. Fairfax kings had spent centuries locking the guilds out of direct political power, and in my opinion they'd been right to. Whenever the guildmasters got a scrap of authority they immediately used it to forced every commerce they could under their thumb, which filled their coffers but also broke smaller traders. Harrion, the owner of the tavern I'd once worked at, had always held the guilds in disdain. He'd been one of the few people in Laure I'd actually liked, so I supposed his opinion might have coloured mine.

The tavern I was currently hiding out in reminded me of the Rat's Nest quite a bit, actually. The wooden walls were just as rickety, the floor creaked like a dying man and the smell of soured wine and vomit was so ingrained it would remain even if the place was put to the torch. I'd preferred dipping in the lake to using the only bathtub they had here, judging I'd come out of that adventure rust-tinged. I hadn't drawn attention in doing so: like in Laure, most everyone living by the lake used it to bathe. Without armour and with only a knife for weaponry, I'd been able to keep my presence quiet. Deoraithe, even half-bloods, were rare outside of Daoine but in this part of the city people knew better than to ask questions. The only reason I'd gotten a few looks was currently entering my room, closing the door behind him. Hakram had put on a cloak but there was no hiding his height or his fangs: Adjutant was the tallest orc I'd ever met, with only Juniper coming close.

"I have it," Hakram said, taking out a thick leather-bound book from under his cloak and dropping it on the table.

I put aside *The Death of the Age of Wonders*, the treatise I was now reading for the second time. Written by Dread Empress Malicia, I'd thought I could glimpse something of how her mind worked through her words. All I'd gotten, though, was that she was a firm believe in checks and balances when it came to the nations of Calernia. That a woman who'd claimed the Tower could believe foreign alliances should be determined by shared interests instead of alignment to Good and Evil was a fascinating departure from the norm, but it taught me little about Malicia as a woman. Dismissing the thought, I cast my eyes on the book Hakram had brought and flipped it open. Columns of numbers and words, scribbled so poorly even my own handwriting was legible in comparison.

"Won't that make for pleasant reading," I sighed.

"I already took a look, it's why I'm late," the orc said. "Here, let me."

He moved the pages with a carefulness that was almost comical, given the size and thickness of his fingers. About halfway through he ceased, and laid a finger on a particular number. Three thousand golden aurelii, spent on...

"Furniture repairs," I snorted. "Maybe she *does* have a sense of humour."

"I've found the carpenters that supposedly did the work," Hakram said. "Elderwoman Keyes knew them. I have sworn statements they did no such thing."

"And we have the ledger from the Guild of Assassins, accounting for the three thousand aurelii," I said quietly. "That should be enough."

Barely a fortnight after claiming my fiefdom in Marchford I'd tasked Ratface to get in touch with all the so-called Dark Guilds of Callow, the criminal mirror to the merchant organization. I really shouldn't have been surprised he was already on speaking terms with all the major ones. The Assassins had been reluctant at the idea of letting me claim a ledger, even if it was to be used against a Praesi. Black had tacitly sanctioned the existence of all the Dark Guilds after the Conquest, preferring limiting them to quotas rather than attempting an eradication that would drive them into the arms of heroes. The Assassins had quibbled until I'd offered them a calm reminder that Tribune Robber could be pulled from his current assignment at any time. The malevolent little shit was starting to have a reputation and I wasn't above using it for my purposes. Still had cost me a small fortune to buy the ledger off of them, which mattered a lot more now than it would have a year ago. Marchford was haemorrhaging coin with no solution in sight, but that was a problem I'd return to chewing on tomorrow. Tonight I had a governess to deal with.

"She didn't have time to cook the books?" I said. "Better than this, I mean."

"She let Heiress' people take care of the official ones," Hakram said, amused. "But she didn't trust Akua with her personal records."

Ah, Praesi backstabbing. The gift that kept on giving.

"You worked quickly," I praised.

He shrugged.

"I knew what we needed, I just had to **Find** it," he said.

I hummed. Adjutant's second aspect, one I still wasn't sure what to think about. There was no denying how useful it had turned out to be – Hakram now frequently stumbled onto exactly what we were looking for, as long as it was feasible for him to do so – but relying too much on aspects was a good way to earn a one-way trip to the graveyard. I'd encouraged him to use it sparingly, but the both of us were drowning in responsibilities these days: there was a reason he'd come into the aspect in the first place. I changed the subject to more current concerns.

"The Gallowborne are in the city?" I asked.

"As of an hour ago," Adjutant said. "They'll be noticed soon, if they haven't been already."

"I don't mind if word spreads," I grunted. "It'll discourage Ife's household troops from getting any ideas."

The elders had assured me that the city guard would stay out of it, but Ife's own men were from the Wasteland. The governess was from a family sworn to the High Lords of Nok, with minor but very old holdings – held since before the Miezens kind of old. That tended to breed unusually strong loyalties in Praesi.

"One last thing," Hakram said. "Heiress' envoys, they're led by an old friend of ours."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Can't be Hawulti, she hasn't set foot in Callow since our pleasant chat in Liesse," I said.

As the heiress to Nok, the Soninke would have been the natural choice for an envoy here.

"Fasili," the orc said. "Slow learner, that one."

The heir to Aksum. Apparently his aunt bluntly stating he was expendable in a scryed conversation with me had driven him even deeper into Heiress' camp. Unfortunate, that. Aksum sat on half a dozen emerald mines, the largest in Calernia, and it had grown rich off of them. Fucking Praesi, rolling in gold and gems when Marchford wasn't even breaking even.

"Let's gift him a reminder, then," I said. "Come along, Adjutant. Let's have a talk with Governess Ife."

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The ranks of the Gallowborne had swelled in the six months that had passed since the end of the Liesse Rebellion. They were not a single company any longer: they numbered four hundred at the moment, the members still handpicked by the former Captain Farrier – now a full Tribune. Still, after a conversation with

Juniper I'd forced his hand when it came to selection: there were Praesi now, if only a few, and orcs. Keeping anybody but my countrymen out of the ranks of my personal guard would have sent the wrong message, on that much I agreed with the Hellhound. About seven out of ten were still Callowan, though, and some of those recruits were fresh off the battlefields of the rebellion.

Not all of them had fought on the Empire's side.

The first time I'd gotten a report that a former member of the Countess Marchford's retinue had tried to enrol in the Fifteenth, I'd poured myself a stiff drink. My initial thought that this would be an isolated occurrence was quickly proven wrong, as hardened soldiers who'd been ready to run out the Empire not a year ago kept on flocking to my banner. Juniper had been of the opinion that they should taken in and then dispersed across the legions that garrisoned Callow, never allowed to gather enough they would be an issue if they rebelled again. Aisha had been more nuanced, suggesting that folding some into the Gallowborne first as a sign of goodwill would gain me approval with the people of Marchford. It was Ratface who'd been the dissenting voice. *Take them all in*, he'd said. *Otherwise you've a city full of veterans with no one to fight for.* Yet. He'd been right. The others hadn't liked it but I'd put my foot down. The Fifteenth filled its rank to the brim before the first month had passed, which was when the first problem had come. We had our four thousand men and still recruits kept showing up.

Word had spread outside of Marchford, and the retinues of half the lords and ladies who'd fought in the rebellion had come to my city. I could not scry Black to ask him for advice, as he was in the Free Cities at the moment and scrying spells tended to break up over the mountains, but to all our surprise it was Nauk who found a solution. Or rather, failed to see where the problem was. *Why do we give a shit if we're over four thousand?* he'd said. *Our charter's incomplete.* Every legion, when founded, was granted a charter by the Empress – truthfully the Black Knight, but he did so in her name. It granted the soldiers right to pay, specified right of recruitment and formalized the right to be equipped by the Imperial forges at Foramen. It also specified the size of the legion. The Fifteenth though, unlike any other legion in living memory, had been raised as a half-legion of two thousand legionaries. That part of the charter had been left unspecified as a consequence, which Nauk took to mean there was no hard limit on our numbers.

A reminder that Black always, *always* played the long game.

The Fifteenth Legion now consisted of a little over six thousand men and was still growing. Juniper had hastily brought in recruits from Praes to balance the composition of the legion, but now over half was made up of Callowans. My general regularly made

pointed comments about their conflicting loyalties, and she was right to. I'd realized too late that those men and women had not stopped fighting for their rebellion: they simply thought they'd joined the banner of a quieter, more successful one. In Praes, these days, I was seen as a symbol of the permanence of the Tower's rule over the former Kingdom. In Callow, though? *Countess*, they called me, but I knew that some of them really meant *Queen*. This was trouble, in the same sense that fire was warm or Heiress was a megalomaniac. Regardless, if there was currently an advantage to having recruits pouring in from all over Callow it was that some of my Gallowborne were familiar with Southpool. They knew their way around the palace.

"We'll have control of the grounds before you get to the hall," Tribune Farrier said quietly from my side.

The two of us were peering at the silhouette of the former residence of the Counts of Southpool. My personal guard has moved swiftly and professionally to secure the palace, after a relative of the eldermen had unlocked a servant entrance. The Gallowborne would be outnumbered, but it was unlikely it would actually come to a fight tonight. Their presence was largely meant as a deterrent for when desperation struck. *And even if it comes to that, they've fought harder things than men.* After Marchford and Liesse, there was precious little that would make the Gallowborne flinch.

"Try to avoid incidents," I said. "I'd like this to go as cleanly as possible."

Or I'd have to answer to the Ruling Council for the mess. While I did own a winning coalition of the votes there, I was not beyond questioning. Baroness Kendal – Anne, as she insisted I call her now – had not lost her principles with her surrender and Sister Abigail abhorred violence of any sort. The two Praesi members had been uncomfortable at the idea of what was going to unfold here tonight, though both were owned by High Lords opposed to the man who owned the governess. That had been enough to make it a unanimous vote, without the appearance of Malicia's representative. The Dread Empress had sent a messenger to cast her vote anyway, without saying how she'd known what the motion put to the council would be.

"My officers are steady," Tribune Farrier said calmly. "There'll be no fuckups, Countess."

"I've come to expect as much, John," I said, clapping his shoulder.

He blushed. He always did, when I called him by his given name. A part of me was still girlishly delighted I could have that effect on people.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I still believe you should take a full line."

"There's no one in that hall for me to be afraid of," I said amusedly. "A tenth is more than enough. Besides, Hakram will be there."

"With all due respect, ma'am," he said, "Lord Adjutant is a target too. It's been a month since they tried to knife him, we're overdue another attempt."

If you'd told me two years ago that assassination attempts on my closest friend in the world would become a somewhat tiresome routine, I would have been fairly sceptical. And yet, here I was, wondering how far the next hired killer would make it before someone but a crossbow bolt in them. The last one hadn't even made it past Apprentice's wards before getting put down. Robber had managed to get a betting pool running without having been in Marchford for months, I assumed through the magical power of being a vicious little bastard. Hopefully the next one would make it past the second line of defence, I had twenty denarii riding on it.

"A tenth will be enough," I repeated dryly. "Hakram, how are we looking?"

A green cabinet with a cloak slapped on top it, also known as Adjutant, stirred in the distance.

"Like we could use a bath from a place where fish don't swim," he said.

"That's insubordination, it is," I complained.

"I'll get away with it," he shrugged. "My commanding officer's a soft touch."

"I'm surrounded by insolence, John," I solemnly told the tribune. "What did I ever do to deserve this?"

"I'm told you flipped off an angel," he replied frankly. "That'd probably do it."

"That's..." I started. "Well, kind of true I guess. Still."

I strode away, my escorting tenth falling behind me seamlessly as Hakram came to my side. The tall orc had put on his legionary armour before we set out, making the cloak even more useless a disguise than before. I'd not bothered with plate myself, keeping to a simple cloth tunic dyed in pale blue. The cloak, though, was the one I was becoming known for. The same one Black had given me years ago, now adorned with strips from the standards of the enemies I'd beaten. It swirled dramatically behind me as I kept a



quick pace towards the banquet hall of old fortress of the counts of Southpool. I had a sword at my hip, now, as well as the knife I'd taken my first life with. Overconfidence had killed more powerful villains than me. The Gallowborne had cleared the corridors of everyone when they'd seized the palace, so we moved without contest. The hall I was looking for was easy enough to find, as it had once served as the room where audiences were held: it was dead at the centre of the structure. The doors to it were already open, though I whimsically wished they hadn't been. This reminded me of another night, in Laure, when I had been on the precipice of the changes that would lead me where I now stood. A lifetime ago, it felt like.

By the sound of it, the guests had yet to notice anything was going on. I made a note to compliment Tribune Farrier on the efficiency of his men. I strolled into the room casually, casting a steady look around. Twenty people in attendance, with Governess Ife at the head of the table. Servants stood to the side in silence, in the Praesi way. Most of the guests were Callowan, though I recognized Fasili as the governess' right side. A Taghrebsat by him, a young woman I did not know. Hard eyes and a scar on her face hinted at a retainer, and one not unfamiliar with violence. Three of the eldersmen I'd struck my deal with were in attendance, clustered near the end of the table. Like servants. They were the first to notice our presence, as Hakram pulled down the hood of his cloak and the Gallowborne fanned out behind me. For another few heartbeats the conversation continued, then awareness spread and the hall turned silent as a grave.

"Get out," I said. "Now."

When Black had stood in my place, he'd used his Name to spread fear in the crowd. I didn't bother, though I'd finally managed to learn the trick to it. The Callowans rose in barely-veiled panic, streaming by the blank-faced silhouetted of the Gallowborne as they fled. Fasili and his retainer only rose after he finished his cup of wine.

"Governess," the heir to Aksum said, slightly bowing his head. "Always a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine," Ife replied with a gracious smile. "Until next time, Lord Fasili."

The Soninke moved unhurriedly, pausing before me.

"Lady Squire," he said icily.

The Taghreb retainer cast a wary eye on me, hand falling to the sword at her hip.

"Fasili," I said. "Do be careful on the way back. I'm told Liesse has a banditry problem."

"A temporary state of affairs," he said.

"More than you know," I smiled pleasantly.

I turned back to the governess, eyeing her curiously. A middle-aged Soninke, her frame still hinting at the slenderness of her youth but now grown thicker. Her eyes were not quite golden but very close. A sign of old blood, Aisha had told me.

"Lady Squire," she greeted me. "You honour me with your presence."

"Governess Ife," I said, grabbing a seat and dragging it at the end of the table facing hers.

The sound of wood scraping on stone almost made her wince. I plopped myself down, then fished out the dragonbone pipe Masego had gifted me. Calmly, under her befuddled gaze, I stuffed it with wakeleaf from a small packet I got from a pocket sown into my cloak. I produced a pinewood match and struck it on the table, lighting the pipe. I inhaled a mouthful of grey smoke and spat it out, carelessly tossing the match into an abandoned cup of wine. There was a long moment of silence, broken only by Hakram failing to entirely smother a chuckle.

"Should I arrange for the servants to bring you a meal?" the Soninke finally said. "I have some of the finest cooks of the provinces in my employ."

I inhaled the smoke, then let out a stream of it. The wakeleaf had become a guilty pleasure of mine, in the last few months. Aisha usually sprinkled a handful of leaves in her tea, as they sharpened wit, but Apprentice had informed me they could be smoked as well. They were, unfortunately, quite expensive. Grown only in Ashur, having been brought from the other side of the Tyrian Sea when the Baalites first founded the cities that would become the Thalassocracy. I used them sparingly as a consequence.

"The night I first became the Squire," I said, "I stood in a hall much like this one."

There was another long silence.

"The story is well known, in some circles," she said, face without expression.

"Mazus wanted to be Chancellor," I mused. "Ambitious, though back then I did not understand exactly how ambitious he truly was. I do not think you suffer from the same flaw, Governess Ife."

"I do not understand your meaning, Lady Squire," she said, eyes wary.

"Greed, you see, I can tolerate," I said. "There's probably been rulers that didn't skim off the top, but I imagine they were in the minority. It's an old sin, that one. As long as it doesn't get out of hand, I can live with it."

"An enlightened attitude," the governess murmured. "If your visit is meant to be a... reminder of the virtues of moderation, your warning has been received."

Hakram calmly placed the ledger on the table, pushing aside a plate filled with pheasant. I would give this to Governess Ife, the fear only showed in her eyes – and even then, only for a moment. I spewed out another mouthful of smoke, letting the haze wreath my face like a grey crown.

"A thousand aurelii a head," I said. "A point in your favour, that you bought Callowan instead of importing specialists from the Wasteland. Even if what you bought is murder."

"I've no idea what you are referring to, my lady," she said.

"We have the matching ledger from the Guild of Assassins," I replied.

Ife closed her eyes.

"My term is at an end, then," she said calmly. "I will be gone by the end of the fortnight. Will the replacement you have chosen require quarters before that?"

"So you *don't* have a mage in Laure," I said, cocking my head to the side. "Not one that can scry, anyway."

I inhaled from the pipe, letting the wakeleaf quicken my blood. I'd thought, that same night in Laure, that when the time came I would enjoy this. That it would feel like justice. *It feels like killing*, I thought as I blew the smoke. *And less cleanly than if I'd used a sword.*

"As of last night, the Ruling Council has determined that acts committed as an Imperial governor fall under the jurisdiction of Callowan authorities," I said.

She was a clever woman, the governess. She did not need for me to explain it any further.

"It would be a mercy," she said, "to allow me poison."

"It would be," I agreed quietly. "But this is Callow, Governess. We hang murderers here."

The Gallowborne moved forward.

"String her up," I ordered.

She did not struggle as my soldiers took her away. I closed my eyes and leaned back in the seat. Eventually my pipe ran out and I emptied the ashes on a cooling plate.

"It was necessary," Hakram said.

He was standing behind me, close enough to touch. He didn't though. He knew me better than that, had seen me in this kind of mood before.

"When's the last time we did the right thing, instead of the necessary one?" I asked tiredly.

"You think this wrong?" he said. "She commissioned murders, even if she did not wield the blade herself. By our laws, she has earned death."

"I don't think it was personal for her," I said, eyes drifting to the ceiling. "She was just consolidating power. Like I'm doing right now, Hakram. If she deserves to hang, don't I?"

"She was breaking the law," the orc gravelled. "You are enforcing it."

"The only reason I don't break laws anymore is because I *make* them, now," I scoffed.

Adjutant laughed softly.

"And that disturbs you?" he asked. "You have toiled to earn that prize since before we ever met."

"There's nothing right about this," I finally said. "I didn't win tonight because I'm better than her. I'm just more powerful. I have a bigger stick, so I decide how it goes."

"*Humans*," Hakram mocked gently. "You speak that as if it were a tragedy, instead of the first truth of Creation: the strong rule, the weak obey."

"I thought," I said quietly, "that we could be better than that."

"Justifications only matter to the just," he gravelled.

I half-smiled. My own words, thrown back at me. And yet...

"I burned men alive, at Three Hills," I said. "Hundreds of them."

"Your enemies," he said. "Soldiers."

I let out a long breath.

"I have done, Hakram, terrible things," I said. "Ugly things. I'll do more, before this is over. If it is ever over."

Once, when we'd talked under moonlight, the orc had compared trying to change the world to pushing a boulder up a mountain. And then watching it roll down the other slope. *It doesn't work that way, though, I thought. There is no summit to the mountain. You just keep pushing until your body gives, and you're the first thing the stone crushes on the way down.* If that was all it could be, though, if all you could ever do was buy some time...

"I made those decisions for a purpose," I said. "I did not cover this land with corpses just to change the flavour of tyranny that rules it. If I don't make it better now, when will I?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"We hang murderers, in Callow. Even the ones Black struck deals with."

I slid back the pipe into my cloak.

"Get a message to Ratface," I said. "He is to prepare for the dismantling of the Guild of Assassins."

## Chapter 2: Might

*"We make the shepherds kings at the end of our stories because they already know how to lead recalcitrant, bleating creatures of limited intellect."*

– Prokopia Lekapene, first and only Hierarch of the Free Cities

Laure had not had an Imperial governor since the unlamented death of Mazus.

The former capital of the Kingdom had been put under martial law while the bastard was still swinging from a noose in the market place, but no replacement had been appointed afterwards – the Empress, as I understood it, had used the possibility of the appointment to effect a little spring cleaning at court. The final body count had been comparable to that of a small battle, with even the Truebloods discreetly clawing at each other through intermediaries as everyone tried to place a relative or dependent at the head of the richest city in Callow. It had come to nothing when the Liesse Rebellion had begun, as there had been no question of ending martial law in Laure while the south was in revolt. The issue of what to do with the city had ultimately become the subject of the very first meeting of the Ruling Council, and it had revealed how the lines would be drawn between its members.

There were, theoretically, seven members. Black was one, the designated head of the council and the only member with the right of veto – which he had given to me along with his vote. Baroness Anne Kendal was another, the first appointment I'd made. Sister

Abigail of the House of Light was the third, a septuagenarian who'd served as a travelling sister for thirty years before settling in an abbey near Ankou in her middle age. She'd been one of the most vocal members of the House to advocate against armed rebellion after the Conquest. She still had, Black had informed me, been put under surveillance by both he and Malicia by sheer virtue of having so many connections across Callow. The House of Light did not have a true hierarchy but some of its members were more influential than others, and Sister Abigail was in the highest tier even among those.

Hakram had also choked the life out of her great-nephew at Three Hills. He'd been the priest who'd prevented us from scrying the Silver Spears, having volunteered to serve with the mercenaries as a liaison for my predecessor in ruling Marchford. The way she seemed to genuinely hold no grudge over the events unsettled me, I had to admit. Priests who'd been under the vows for long enough were always... unearthly but Sister Abigail was in a league of her own. I'd never seen her be anything but the picture of health and Ratface had told me she'd healed a bleeding gut wound in the cathedral without breaking a sweat. There was power behind the doting grandmotherly smile.

The two Praesi with seats were like night and day. Murad Kalbid was sworn to the High Lady of Kahtan, a distant cousin who'd married into a lesser family, and was exactly what Callowans picture when they thought of the Taghreb. Desert-lean and with tanned skin like leather, the middle-aged man had a closely-cropped beard and moustache that made his dark eyes stand out. I'd never seen him without a sword at his hip and he could light candles with nothing but a word. Satang Motherless, as the Soninke was apparently named, was the survivor of a succession dispute in Aksum who'd come into the service of the High Lord of Okoro. She seemed to me a lesser take on Heiress, when it came to appearance, with cheekbones not quite as high and curves not quite as full. Her hair she kept in a series of braid the way Apprentice did, though without the magical trinkets. There was a red mark on her cheek that looked like three lines, and I couldn't tell if it was a tattoo or some particularly vivid birthmark. Whatever it was there was sorcery in it.

The two foreigners had wasted no time in striking an informal alliance, working together to nudge the Council in directions their patrons would approve of. Early on they'd tried to suggest that properties seized from the nobles who'd fought in the rebellion should be put to auction under Murad's supervision, supposedly to raise funds for the reconstruction, but I'd stamped the notion down hard with Sister Abigail's support. Half the treasures would be gone before the first sell was ever made, packed in carts headed for the Wasteland. Aisha was convinced Satang was in communication with Heiress, but I was not so sure. Nothing concrete had been dug up by my people, though admittedly

what passed for my spy network was barely out of the cradle. I'd still have to act as if she was, just in case. I knew for a fact Akua kept close eye on the proceedings here in Laure, to prepare for the blows before I could land them on her. So far I'd only tightened the screws by stripping the Liesse governorship of lands and by passing a decree that banned any Callowan official from summoning or dealing with devils, but I wasn't done. Not until she crawled back to the Wasteland, or preferably straight into the Underworld.

The last and seventh seat was for Malicia's personal representative, and had gone unfilled. The Empress had sent messengers to cast her vote on occasion, so far only for issues that related to the scope of the Ruling Council's authority over Callow.

Tonight's session would be light, in theory, with only my own accounting of the events in Southpool being a topic after we received the monthly report from the magistrates that now ruled Laure. Baroness Kendal had been tasked with overseeing them personally after the appointments were made, but the two Praesi had insisted on a regular report to the council. They weren't entirely wrong. I doubted a woman like Anne Kendal would try to fill her pockets with bribes but General Orim still garrisoned the city and he'd been openly sceptical about a former rebel being given power over his legionaries. Being able to say there would be oversight by Wastelanders and myself had gone a long way in soothing those ruffled feathers. *Compromises*, I grimaced. I'd had to make quite a few of those lately, and I didn't like it. I missed Black, to my dismay, and more than the man I missed his advice.

The room the Ruling Council used for its sessions had once been the private meeting room of the sovereigns of Callow. The Queen of Blades once sat in that same seat I called my own and so had Jehan the Wise. So had the likes of Mazus, later on, but that era was over now. It was tastefully decorated – marble floors with hexagonal tiles and old wood panelling under a beautifully painted ceiling – but I wasted no time on the sights before heading for my seat at the head of the table: the other members were already there. All six of them. *So the Empress finally sent her representative*, I thought, studying the woman in question. Soninke, dark eyes betraying a common birth and no callouses on her palms. Not a fighter then. Probably a court appointee. Neither of the other Praesi in the room seemed to know her and that clearly made them uncomfortable. As it should. Wastelanders were afraid of Black in the dark of night, I'd found, but they were *always* afraid of the Empress. She'd given them reason to.

"We've a newcomer, I see," I said, taking off my riding gloves and setting them on the table.

The representative rose from her seat and gracefully bowed.

"An honour to make your acquaintance, Lady Squire," she said. "I am Lady Naibu, representative for her Most Dreadful Majesty on the council."

*Lady Deputy*, in Mtethwa. Ime's sense of humour still made me wince from across an entire empire. I really shouldn't have expected any better of a woman who thought calling herself *patience* would lend her mystique.

"We're pleased to have you with us," I half-lied.

Not that convincingly, if the way Sister Abigail discreetly coughed into her sleeve was any indication. Baroness Kendal smiled pleasantly, murmuring courtesies at the newcomer from her neighbouring chair as Naibu sat and I settled into my own seat.

"I didn't see the magistrates waiting outside when coming in," I said. "Was their report already given?"

"It was delayed until tomorrow, Lady Squire," Setang said. "There's been news of greater import from Dormer."

I raised an eyebrow. Anne Kendal's former barony had been one of the first governorships to be filled after the rebellion – she'd suggested one of the town's eldersmen for the first mandate, to smooth the transition when a more long-term appointee was found, and after having him looked into I'd seen no reason to refuse.

"There's been a Fae incursion," Sister Abigail said. "A handful of Summer court fairies snuck into the town after finagling an invitation, then forced the people to dance until a priest drove them off."

I blinked slowly. The *Fae*? They never left the Waning Woods. Dormer was one of the Callowan holdings closest to the woods, certainly, but it was still a few days of riding away. The only known gate into Arcadia was near Refuge, and- I stopped cold. That was no longer true, was it? Masego had speculated as much months ago and he'd confirmed it since: when the demon of Corruption had lingered in Marchford, it had weakened the borders between Arcadia and Creation. Nothing had come through, so far, but... *Shit*. I need to talk with Apprentice.

"There were no dead, as I understand it," Murad said, facing the sister.

"A handful of sprained limbs was the worst of it," Baroness Kendal replied, drawing his attention.

"Then there should be no need to lower the taxes due," Setang smiled.



The segue was too smooth for the two of them not to have planned it.

"The priority at the moment should be making sure the Fae don't come back," I said sharply. "There's no legion garrisoning the region, if some of the fairies into the rougher stuff come knocking they'll be vulnerable."

"I am told the Fifteenth regularly holds field exercises," Naibu spoke up, the first time since the conversation had begun. "Perhaps one might be arranged close to the town."

I eyed her cautiously. I'd been thinking of saying as much, but hearing the words coming from an unknown had me rethinking it. My men would be close to Heiress' wheelhouse, if they went there, and if she hadn't cooked up some nasty tricks since we last met I'd eat my godsdamned gloves.

"I'll speak with General Juniper," I finally grunted. "It's placeholder solution, regardless. The Fifteenth is based in Marchford so if this become an unstable border there'll be a need for a more permanent presence."

"Reaching out to the Lady of the Lake might yield answers as to why it happened," Sister Abigail suggested. "She's said to know Arcadia better than anyone alive."

I knew the Empire was in diplomatic contact with Refuge, but I honestly had no idea *how* that contact was maintained. Scrying that close to a gate into Arcadia would basically be sending a written invitation to the Wild Hunt but surely they couldn't be sending messengers on foot every time? Less than half of them would actually make it to Refuge: those entire woods were even more of a death trap than the Wasteland. I didn't want to admit to ignorance in front of those people so I smiled knowingly instead, meeting Setang's eyes until she looked away. *When in doubt, pretend it was always part of the plan.*

"Measures will be taken," I said vaguely.

That should keep them guessing. No one else seemed to have anything else to add, so Baroness Kendal suggested we adjourn for the night – my own report on Southpool could wait until tomorrow, when we saw the magistrates. It was a little abrupt considering how little we'd talked but they'd grown to know a little of me in the last six months: whenever proceedings got too tedious or I had other business I tended to end the sessions early. Council members rose one after another, bowing before asking my leave. I gave it absent-mindedly, eyes on Naibu – who was still seated. Well now. That promised to be interesting. Sister Abigail was the last to leave and she closed the door behind her, leaving only silence. I was about to speak up when Malicia's envoy suddenly twitched. Not just a little, too: her entire body convulsed

before stilling suddenly. A heartbeat hadn't even passed before I was on my feet, sword in hand.

"That won't be necessary, Catherine," she said, voice eerily calm.

The Soninke held herself differently now. Straighter in her seat, hands folded primly into her lap. There was command in her bearing.

"Your Most Dreadful Majesty," I said.

The meat-puppet smiled approvingly.

"Deputy, is it?" I muttered. "Someone had fun with that."

"This is a flesh simulacrum with a semblance of personality inserted," Malicia shrugged gracefully. "One of Nefarious' rare slivers of brilliance. It serves my purposes better than coming to Callow in person."

I sheathed the sword slowly.

"Are you always in there, or..."

I gestured vaguely.

"Do not ask that question if you want to sleep well tonight," the Empress smiled. "Suffice it to say, anything my deputy hears will eventually come to my ears. You may consider her opinions to be mine for all practical purposes."

One of those days, I was going to come across something from the Tower that wasn't the stuff of nightmares. But not today, evidently.

"I take it there's things going on I don't know about," I said.

There was a safe bet if I'd ever made one.

"You are not incorrect. First, however, I bring news from the south," Malicia said.

I perked up at that. Black had been in the Free Cities for a few months but word trickled up to Callow slowly. Whatever I heard was always late enough to be largely irrelevant.

"Last I heard he was in Penthes," I said.

"There are currently twelve claimants to the title of Exarch in the city," the Empress informed me amusedly. "A little excessive even for him, but they are effectively out of the war until the matter is resolved. At last contact he was headed for Nicae, but with the latest developments I believe he'll turn to Delos."

I raised an eyebrow.

"It hasn't fallen?" I said. "I thought the Tyrant was marching on it."

It had drawn quite a bit of attention when an unheard-of villain had come out of nowhere and grilled the third of an army on his way to Atalante. Said city-state had been sacked and conquered a few weeks afterwards, its armies dispersed in the field. Apparently half the mercenaries Atalante had bought turned to banditry after the defeat and had then been press-ganged into the Tyrant's army one band at a time. The Named and his army had moved towards Delos afterwards, which was the last I'd heard.

"The initial assault was repulsed," Malicia informed me. "The Tyrant is sieging the city with his... usual flair."

The last part was spoken with distaste.

"The man basically tore through an army on his own," I said slowly. "And he was slapped down by a place known for its *scribes*?"

"There are heroes in the city," the Empress said.

Well, shit. That explained why Black was headed there, too.

"I don't suppose we know the Names?" I asked.

"The White Knight is one," she replied. "And a woman I believe you know, though she goes by a different face now: the Wandering Bard."

I cursed. White Knight sounded ominous like all Hells, but the Bard was a pest I was more familiar with.

"Well, she was bound to turn up eventually," I said. "That's going to be a mess."

"There are at least three others, but on those I've yet to acquire anything concrete," the Empress added.

Five heroes. The usual number, when something was going to go horribly wrong for villains. Was there a specific term for that, I wondered? People used cluster for fish and herd for sheep, there had to be a term for heroes. *A murder*, I snorted. Or maybe a gaggle, like with cats. So Black was going to be stuck dealing with a full gaggle of heroes. That ought to make his year.

"Procer's still staying out of it?" I said.

"Dearest Cordelia has been sending her disaffected soldiers to Nicae," Malicia said. "More than ten thousand already and the number grows by the day. More importantly, she convinced Ashur to

lift its restrictions on Nicean commerce – so they can actually afford to feed them. The fulcrum of the war will be the battle that host fights, the current conflicts are merely setting the stage.”

“Keeps her too busy to sniff around Callow, at least,” I muttered. “Small favours.”

The Empress took a hand off her lap and rested her chin on the palm, somehow managing elegance in a body not her own.

“Callow is what brings me here as it happens,” she said. “You’ve been rather busy of late, Catherine.”

That, I reflected, did not seem like the beginning of a pleasant conversation.

“Still learning the ropes,” I said. “There’s so much to do even three of me wouldn’t be on top of things.”

“Delegating to Baroness Kendal was the step in the right direction,” Malicia said. “Continue to find trustworthy individuals and invest them with authority.”

I cocked my head to the side.

“Not a lot of those around,” I admitted.

Most of the people I could rely on were in the Fifteenth, and I couldn’t keep piling civilian duties onto them. Their workload had already expanded massively with the way the legion had swelled.

“Then find leverage on people you do not trust and use them regardless,” the Empress said. “Murad has children in Kahtan and cares for them. A scare there would keep him in line. He has experience commanding a city guard and you need someone to head Laure’s.”

“I’m trying avoid importing leadership from Praes,” I said, trying to keep my tone not accusatory..

“The Empire decapitated Callow’s ruling class two generations in a row,” Malicia noted. “Train replacements, by all means, but you need people filling positions *now*. Through your actions you’ve begun to centralize authority in Callow without crafting an administration that can wield that power. The result of that can only be anarchy.”

I swallowed. I was, well, out of my depth here. The Empress sighed.

"You are young, younger than ever we were when we seized power," she said. "I do not expect immediate flawlessness of you. What I can teach you, I will."

She leaned back into her seat.

"Let us go over your actions in Southpool, as an exercise," she said. "What do you believe the common perception is of what happened there?"

"A corrupt Praesi governess was removed," I frowned.

"Forcefully," Malicia said. "Strung up in front of the fortress gates for all to see."

"The Empire isn't exactly shy about making examples, as a rule," I said.

"In exceptional cases," the Empress said. "Governess Ife was not one. Removing her was necessary for your purposes, but the *manner* was incorrect. You should have had her assassinated discreetly and moved in your replacement."

"If she just disappears then the point doesn't get made," I grunted.

That whole matter was still like an itch I couldn't scratch, and going over it wasn't exactly my idea of an agreeable evening. I listened anyway: the Empress hadn't managed to command a pack of wolves like the High Lords for over forty years by looking pretty. If she had advice, it was worth hearing.

"It is made to the people it is meant for," Malicia disagreed. "More than that, think on what the people of Southpool saw. Wasteland nobility, hung like a common Callowan criminal."

"She *acted* like a common Callowan criminal," I said, temper flaring as I struggled not to raise my voice.

"Every eye on Callow is on you, Catherine," the Empress said. "*You are the person setting their cues.* If what you employ is violence, in violence they will follow. Against all available targets."

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose, then grunted.

"Fair," I said. "Riots against the legions aren't what I was going for. Still, I don't *have* assassins to use. My closest equivalent is..."

"Currently checking the progress of your opponent," Malicia completed for me, when I let the sentence trail. "The natural tool for you would be the Guild of Assassins, but you've other ideas."

I grimaced. Of course she knew. No part of that had been a question.

"In the future," she said, "have your mages use a more advanced version of the scrying spell formula. Apprentice will know several. The one you currently use is exceedingly easy to listen into. Heiress certainly has been, among others."

That she wasn't being smug about it actually kind of made it worse.

"Their existence as an entity breaks Tower law," I said defensively.

"There has never been nor will there ever be a nation without hired killers," Malicia replied. "You might, at best, disband the organized aspect of it for a few decades. The trade will still be plied as long as someone has a knife and another has coin."

"So I should just allow a pack of murderers to do as they want because people are assholes?" I retorted. "What's the point of even having a law against it then?"

"The purpose of law is not to define right and wrong, it is to regulate behaviour," the Empress said. "You are a ruler now, Catherine. Your only concern should be *control*."

She shrugged languidly.

"If you deem it necessary to assert greater control over the Guild of Assassins, do so," she said. "But attempting to destroy it entirely would set you on a collision course with all of the Dark Guilds. You cannot rule a realm if you are at war with every institution in it."

"Are you ordering me not to disband them?" I asked through gritted teeth.

Anything short of that wasn't going to make me back down. The simulacrum the Empress was possessing studied me for a moment.

"No," she finally said. "If you fail, it will be a learning experience. If you succeed – well, I have been faced with the occasional surprise over the years. I will warn you, however, that you do not currently have the resources to face them."

I grimaced. Marchford had been one of the richest cities in Callow, before the rebellion. Before a demon had set camp for a few days over the silver mines, filling the streets with disaffected miners and their families. There was a reason enrolling in the Fifteenth was so popular at the moment. With bridge that was the main trade route in and out of the hills only just freshly raised after the Silver Spears had torched it, trade

had yet to pick up. And that wasn't even counting on the gaping hungry maw that was rebuilding the devastated city. I was beginning to regret having told Robber to torch that manor, since I'd been supposed to actually live in it.

"Apprentice told me the mines will be purged of contamination within a few months," I said. "It'll be easier after that."

"Upon you return to Marchford," Malicia said, "you will be presented with an offer by the Matron of the High Ridge tribe. It could prove a solution to your woes, though you should think long before accepting it."

I frowned. High Ridge? Pickler's tribe, that, and the reigning Matron would be her mother. Ominous.

"Make haste back to your holdings, Catherine," the Empress said. You'll find greater trouble there than you know – your bastard has been surprisingly competent in suppressing rumours."

The meat-puppet leaned forward, the Dread Empress of Praes looking through it.

"But above all, do not think for a moment that Heiress being silent means she has forgotten you. You might be a legacy, Catherine Foundling, but then so is *she*."

Lady Naibu twitched, then went still. The only sign of life there was the steady rise and fall of her chest.

"It's going to be one of those years, isn't it?" I sighed.

## **Interlude: Gate**

*"Oh, I get it. The real treasure was the people I had executed along the way!"*

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

"Something's coming through," Kilian said.

Dawn was beginning to warm the stones of Marchford's central plaza, but there would be no bustle of humans today. There hadn't been for half a fortnight: the Hellhound had closed off this entire section of the city and garrisoned it heavily at Apprentice's recommendation. Nauk brushed off a speck of ash from the stripes on his shoulder that now marked him a legate of the Fifteenth, irritated at the way the burnt wood got everywhere. The very redhead who'd just handed him the latest bit of bad news had ordered for braziers full of holly and apple tree to be set up in all four corners of the plaza and kept ever-burning.

"How big, this time?" the orc asked.

The Senior Mage muttered in the mage tongue and squinted at the runes that formed in the air.

"Still minor," she said. "The frequency is increasing, though. They're building up to something."

Nauk spat to the side.

"Those are scouts, Kilian," he said. "Like a clan would send before a killing raid. They're looking for weaknesses."

Spikes of iron had been hammered into the stone in irregular patterns on the first day to make it harder for the Fae to step into Creation, but the border had been getting thinner with every dawn anyway. Juniper had prudently ordered that containment wards be set up around this section of the city before moving in legionaries, deploying most of the Fifteenth's mages to attend the defences. Nauk had been put in charge of manning the defences with his *jesha* of two thousand, the largest combat deployment of the legion since the Liesse Rebellion. While Kilian went around marking stones and muttering to herself with her posse of mages following, he'd looked for more pragmatic means of making sure anything that wandered into the plaza didn't make it any further.

Pickler had set up half a dozen engines of her own design on the rooftops that offered the best lines of fire, sappers huddling around them in quiet clusters even now. Fortifying the alleys was old hand for his legionaries, after the battles of Marchford and Liesse, but Nauk wouldn't bet on stone doing much to hold back fairies. The scrawny little shits were basically magic poured into a body, as he understood it, and he'd seen the kind of damage a properly motivated mage could wreak. Grabbing his now-cold mug of tea from the table where he'd left it, the large orc rose to his feet and drained the bitter brew. Drinking leaf water still struck him as the most absurd of human habits, but unlike a good slab of meat the tea wouldn't leave him indolent afterwards. One of the first lessons they taught young raiders, in the Waxing Moons: always hit the enemy after a meal, if you can. They get sloppy and slow.

There was no great flash of lightning or pretty lights, when the fairy entered Creation. A slight shimmer in the air, then a sparrow was flapping its wings at the centre of the iron spike maze. It narrowly avoided running into the iron-wrought invisible wall that had flattened the first of its kind to come through, skilfully weaving around it. Nauk left behind the informal command centre of his *jesha*, well behind fortifications and lines of legionaries, and strode to the edge of the plaza where he could get a better look. The fae-sparrow began threading through the maze, unaffected by any wind born of Creation as it flew.



"They've been watching from the other side the whole time," Kilian said quietly.

Nauk had already deduced as much yesterday: the fae never made the same mistake twice. Kilian's course track at the College had been the magic one, though, so he wasn't surprised she hadn't gotten her hand in the broth until now.

"No mischief in this," the orc said. "They're not behaving like tricksters. Something bigger and meaner is telling them what to do."

"My wards wouldn't even slow the Wild Hunt down," the redheaded mage said. "So there's that, at least."

"Don't know shit about fairies," Nauk admitted.

Which wasn't entirely true. He had an old family recipe for braising them with southern spices, but Kilian was quarter-fae and might be displeased by the revelation. Humans always got all offended when orcs mentioned eating other humans, like eating each other wasn't the most natural state of Creation. You'd think they'd never eaten a rabbit, by the way their hackles got raised. You just had to accept that, to the Clans, everyone else might as well be rabbits.

"The Tower might have reliable records about them, but anything we have is useless," the mage said, brushing back a strand of her short red hair. "Whichever is lord and lady of what might change thrice before one of our days is over. There's supposedly four Courts of Arcadia – one for each season – but the delineation between them isn't clear. They don't all exist at the same time, either."

"That sounds like a problem for General Juniper to figure out," Nauk said cheerfully. "And the Boss, whenever she gets back."

"She's only a few days away now," Kilian said absent-mindedly.

The orc eyed the human amusedly until she coughed to hide a blush and looked away. He had a feeling there'd been precious little military business discussed during *that* scrying session. It was an open secret in the upper echelons of the Fifteenth that Kilian and Cat were involved, though only among officers who'd been there since the founding of the legion. The fresh blood wasn't trusted yet. Nauk didn't have much against Callowans – they were steady in a shield wall and they died spitting in the enemy's face, so there was spine to respect – but he wouldn't be trusting any of those boys until he'd shared a proper battle with them. There was an unspoken line in the sand between the legionaries who'd fought in the Liesse campaign and those who hadn't, one that had overtaken the weaker lines once drawn by race.

The sparrow made it out of the maze after a little while more, landing on the ground. The bid's form shimmered and in its place came a kneeling man wearing silken robes all in shades of blue. Pale-skinned, like the locals, though fine-boned and taller. He was the first one to make it all the way through, and that did not bode well.

"Get that thing out of my backyard, Kilian," Nauk ordered. "Before it can make a mess."

The Senior Mage raised a hand, then made a fist. There was an eldritch crackle and the smell of ashes spread across the plaza as thin spikes of light gathered around the redhead's hands. The fae's silhouette twitched, but it did not disappear. Kilian gritted her teeth.

"O lords of iron, bar my gate through your embrace," she barked. "Choke it that trespasses, smother in coils unmoving."

The twitches identified until there was a sound like bone breaking and the fae dispersed into thin air. Kilian panted for a moment afterwards.

"They've got a foothold," she said. "Prepare for combat."

"*Finally*," Nauk grinned, rolling his shoulder with a loud crack.

The legate cast a look at the legionaries forming a steel-clad circle around the plaza, dug in behind wooden spikes and fields of caltrops.

"UP AND AT IT, YOU WHORESONS," he called out. "THEY'VE COME KNOCKING."

All around the formation swords were drawn, shields raised and crossbows armed. The veterans who'd defended this very city from devils now ready to give the boot to the latest idiots to believe they could get a slice of Catherine Foundling's fiefdom. That was probably the best part about following Squire, Nauk thought. There was always someone trying to knock her off and they made the most hilarious faces when fed their own entrails.

"Outer boundaries are holding for now," Kilian said quietly. "My mages are feeding the wards, though, so don't expect magical support."

"I brought my own support," Nauk said, baring his teeth at the spindly scorpions Pickler had built.

Whatever arcane bullshit had been making it hard for the fairies to cross was gone now, the orc saw. Before there'd never been more than one coming across at a time – the only time two cats had manifested, they'd disappeared before even touching the

ground – but now he could count at least three dozen shimmers in the air. The twinkly bastards must have been out of sparrows, because what came out was over thirty tall men and women in splendid court dress. Long-sleeved tunics of frost and woven shadows played off dresses of snow and bones, the fae wearing them even more striking than the otherworldly clothes. They were not humans, Nauk thought. Their faces were too long, their eyes too large and bright. Their teeth were the teeth of killers, not prey. Shades of skin went from dark as ebony to driven snow, not a single one of them resembling another. All were armed. Spears of bone and bronze, swords of translucent ice set with lapis-lazuli, even a few bows of dead wood whose string appeared to be crafted from wind.

“The Fair Folk,” Kilian said, tone halfway between longing and fear.

“Twits should have worn armour,” Nauk grunted, unimpressed.

One of the ladies idly touched an iron spike with her foot. It shattered like glass. So much for that line of defence, the legate thought.

“Lovely children,” the same fae spoke, tone carrying everywhere without ever being loud. “Who speaks for you?”

Nauk pushed aside the legionaries in the front line and made his way through. Kilian followed, hands hidden behind her back. Some of the legionaries had almost dumbstruck look on their faces, the orc saw. Mostly humans. There’d been something lilting in the fairy’s voice, like a buzzing in his ears, but after years of dealing with the Red Rage it might as well have been tickling.

“Legate Nauk of the Fifteenth Legion,” the orc introduced himself.

He’d stopped sixty paces away, though he still felt exposed so far from the shield wall.

“Senior Mage Kilian, of the same,” the redhead added a moment later.

The fae’s gaze lingered on the mage, but turned to the orc soon enough. She smiled in a way that was probably meant to be enchanting. She might have succeeded, if she didn’t look like a skinny pale pack of twigs in a dress. Nauk like women a little greener, and with a talent for engineering.

“So strong,” the fae praised. “So wilful. This will be a day to remember.”

What was it with supernatural creatures and thinking creepy worked for them?

"You got a name?" the orc asked.

"I am the Lady of Snags and Bones," she smiled. "The-"

"You're trespassing," Nauk interrupted flatly.

She looked a little miffed at that, the first time her mask of perfection was marred.

"This land belongs to the Lady of Marchford," he continued. "You're walking her street and breathing her air, without permission. Fuck off."

It might have been for the best he'd never taken any of the diplomacy classes, Nauk mused.

"Ah, but we like it here," one of the men said. "I think we'll stay."

There was a round of perfect laughter from the rest of the fae. The man strode forward and bowed theatrically.

"I am-"

"I don't really care," Nauk admitted bluntly.

"Nauk, let the man finish," Kilian chided. "We'll need more than one name for the report."

"There will be no report," the Lady of Snags and Bones smiled. "This place belongs to Arcadia now, and we do not bother with such bores in the Land Resplendant."

"You must have many questions, Legate Nauk," the man said in a conciliatory tone. "We will help you in this."

"Only the one, really," the orc said.

"Ask us, dearest one," the woman encouraged.

"Iron," Nauk of the Waxing Moons said, baring sharp fangs. "Does it spoil the taste?"

"Pardon?" the man said, blinking in surprise.

"For when you end up in the cookpot," he explained.

Kilian finished casting the signal, the number five in Miezian numerals forming out of fire above them, and the scorpions began spitting out bolts of cold iron. The orc unsheathed his sword and began backing away as the first wave of bolts speared a handful of fairies, dragging out horrifying screams as their veins turned dark and pulsing all over their bodies. Now, typically speaking, would have been the dead moment between two scorpion volleys when

the sappers reloaded the engines. These were not the classic design of the Legions of Terror, however, they were children of Senior Sapper Pickler of the High Ridge tribe. Bolts dropped down from wooden magazines, a lever was cocked and the scorpions fired *again*.

“LEGIONARIES, FORWARD!”

Commander Jwahir, one his Senior Tribune after – well, even now thinking of that too much was likely to make him lose control, so he forced his thoughts out of that path. Jwahir’s voice had been the one calling out, the Taghreb well-briefed on their defensive plans and her role in them. Even with the steady stream of scorpion fire coming from the rooftops, the fairies were not pinned down. Immediately they scattered in all directions, which unfortunately involved down the path of Nauk’s own retreat. The so-called Lady of Snags and Bones was one of two that did, as well as some dark-skinned fae with a long barbed spear.

“This could have been painless for all of you,” the Lady mourned, advancing with a sword that could have been either crystal or ice.

A crossbow bolt from the ranks sailed straight for her neck and she batted it aside without even looking.

“I feel like this might be the weak part of this plan,” Kilian said, hands quickly tracing runes in the air even as she retreated with him.

“Don’t be a killjoy,” Nauk said. “How often do we get to kill anything ourselves, these days?”

“*Us* killing *them* is the weak part,” the mage replied.

The Lady leapt forward like a great cat but the orc was ready for her. His rectangular legionary’s shield caught the translucent blade and it bounced off the red-painted steel, though not before heavily denting the surface. Nauk had been a heavy before being an officer, so he wasn’t armed like a regular: his longsword swung before she could retreat. She ducked under the swing with a mocking laugh, scoring a blow on his greaves that frosted over immediately. Fucking fairies, now he’d have to requisition another set. Kilian would have been in more trouble than him, since she didn’t have a shield of her own, but when the other fae came for her she barked out a word in the arcane tongue and lightning flashed. The fairy parried the bolt of electricity with its spear without missing a beat and went to run through her throat only to hastily retreat when the lightning swung around and went for him again.

New trick, that. Her talks with Apprentice must be paying off. Feet steady, Nauk continued retreating with his shield up even as

the Lady continued to assault him. She was too nimble for him to get a proper hit in, especially when wearing a full set of plate. Kilian kept her opponent away by weaving her streak of lightning, constantly murmuring under her breath even as she broke it into separate pieces and finally managed to sink part of it into her opponent's shoulder. The fae twitched uncontrollably, skin burning until a volley of crossbow bolts from their left put him out of his misery.

"You cannot defeat the Court," the Lady of Snags and Bones snarled, face turned ugly by hatred. "We will not die, will not relent, until we have our due."

Her strike sheared off the upper third of Nauk's shield but the legate smashed the rest into her stomach. She flinched, which bought him just long enough to toss the useless thing at her head. She batted that away easily enough and even managed to catch his downwards swing with her sword. Muscles flexing, Nauk tried to force his blade down. *Useless*, he realized. Even one-handed she was stronger than him and worse her pretty little sword was digging into goblin steel. A crack appeared, then the longsword shattered as she smirked triumphantly. She thought he was unarmed, now. *Orcs are never unarmed*. He lunged forward and his fangs sunk into her throat, his useless remains of a sword clattering against the ground. Nauk ripped out a chunk and pushed on the the ground, swallowing bloodless flesh as the Lady screamed. Ugh. Tasted like bad pork. A spear of flame erupted from Kilian's hand and dispersed the Lady of Snags and Bones for good.

"A gorget would have covered the throat," Nauk told the puddle of water. "That's why we wear armour, you bloody glittering *amateur*."

The closing wall of shields and the crossbows fired from behind them had managed to pick off the fae not run through by Pickler's repeating scorpions. The Fifteenth Legion was, once again, master of the field. Nauk returned for lines as cheers spread, Kilian at his side.

"We'll need to send Juniper a report," he said. "First incursion was repulsed, but it won't be the last."

As if to prove him right, a sharp keen immediately erupted in the centre of the plaza. He glanced back, and the way there was only a single shimmer in the air was not as reassuring as it should have been.

"Kilian," he growled urgently.

The mage was already looking at her warding runes, face pale.

"There's nothing I can do to stop that," she spoke in a low voice. "Nauk, whatever it is it's *huge*. It has a bigger draw on the wards than the last band put together."

The moment he was behind the shield wall he began barking orders. Whatever was crossing, they were hitting it with everything the moment it was corporeal. He'd been expecting some sort of giant winter monster, but what actually arrived was a single woman. Decked in an armour of twisted dead wood from head to toe, her long dark hair was the only part of her visible under the helmet – save for the eyes, an eerie unnatural blue. A sheathed longsword was at her hip and a spear made entirely of bronze was in her hand. The fae glanced at the storm of arrows and bolts headed for her, then tapped the bottom of her spear against the ground. Frozen out of the air, the projectiles fell in useless piles.

"We may have a problem," Kilian said.

Mist rose from the bolts on the ground, obscuring the field of vision. Nauk's officers were not prone to panic, though, and ranks tightened quietly. The mist thickened, then began swirling. Wicked-looking shards of ice began to form in the whirling mess and the legate grimaced at the idea of that spell hitting his lines. One of which, he noticed with a flare of anger, was splitting in two. A single man in robes passed through them, scowling heavily at the growing storm even as the ranks closed seamlessly behind him. Dark skin, spectacles, could stand to lose a few pounds. Apprentice had finally decided to intervene. The Named strode into the storm, tracing symbols, and a heartbeat later it erupted into a column of steam. The fae stood unruffled where it had been, pointing her spear at the Soninke.

"Do you have *any* idea," Apprentice snapped, "how many experiments I've had to put on hold to come here?"

Nauk choked out a laugh. The warlock's get was in a mood – this was going to *hurt*. A dozen blades of ice formed in the air in front of the spear and shot off in Apprentice's direction, so swift they were but pale blurs. The mage extended a hand and they were yanked to the side, passing to his left before turning around his back and forming into a single large spiked sphere as they returned to the sender. Kilian let out a sharp breath. The orc glanced at her curiously.

"He rewrote the formula halfway through," she said.

"That's nice," Nauk said.

"Nauk," she said. "That's like... solving an equation with blind variables, replacing those variables with the values you want to get an entirely different result and *doing the whole thing in the span of three heartbeats*."

She sounded admiring, and more than a little envious.

"There can't be more than six people alive today who can do that," she said.

"Look, now he's making a friend," Nauk contributed helpfully.

The fae was hovering in the air now, desperately trying to reach for its sword even as Apprentice glared at it.

"Whoever sent you is still listening, right?" the Soninke said. "Allow me to make this perfectly clear: if you interrupt my research again, *you will be the next test subject.*"

Apprentice closed his fist and the fae wrenched into a ball with a sick crunch before falling to the ground. The Soninke was already walking away, complaining under his breath.

"I *will* abuse my rank to get out of writing the report for this," Nauk informed Kilian, making a tactical retreat before the redhead could protest.

## **Heroic Interlude: Arraignment**

*"Sixty-seven: putting an arrow in a villain during their monologue is a perfectly acceptable method of victory. Heroes believing otherwise do not get to retire."*

– Two Hundred Heroic Axioms, unknown author

Delos was organized in tiers. It reminded Hanno of the city he'd been born in, Arwad. Smaller than Smyrna, the capital of the Thalassocracy, it had been even more strictly regimented than the larger city. There were differences, though, that grew more apparent the longer he spent here. In Arwad people lived and died in the citizenship tier they'd been born to, while in Delos positions in the Secretariat and the attending privileges were... fluid. The city itself was arranged to reflect this: behind the walls, districts were built on clockwise platforms that spiralled higher and thinner until they reached the House of Ink and Parchment. The district where one lived was determined by committees of Secretariat, the arrangements subject to monthly review according to performance and seniority. A botched report could see you lowered by a district, reaching fifty years in the civil service could earn you a manse in the shade of the city's centre of power.

The way the city had been built had made it easy to defend in the siege. The Tyrant's forces had broken through the gates once and found the lowest district turned into a killing field, the stairways up to the second district collapsed or barred as the walls of the houses above effectively became a set of inner walls. The Helikean madman had nearly won anyway. It was not his



professional army he'd sent as the first wave: only mercenaries and forced conscripts from the people of Atalante. The sheer disregard the Tyrant had spent their lives with had almost managed to buckle the defences, until Hanno had intervened with his associates. Revealing there were heroes in the city had been tipping his hand early, but it was better than allowing Delos to fall. Blooding his team had been necessary, anyway. The sisters had never seen full scale battle before and the Valiant Champion had only ever worked alone. What the Bard did or did not know was buried under a sea of bad liquor, but to his understanding her Role was not meant for fighting.

As for him? To be the White Knight was to be an instrument of war in the hands of the Heavens. His years in the Chamber of Borrowed Lives had shown him the Role behind his Name, even as his skills grew, and made his hazy understanding of this into an irrefutable fact. Hanno was the veteran of a hundred battles, each more desperate than the last, but he'd not spilled blood himself before that day. Or perhaps he had. The sorceries of the Gigantes were beyond the comprehension of men, even those touched by the Gods Above. The Tyrant's response to the repulsing of his first attack had been... unexpected, though not entirely unforeseen. The walls of Delos were sixty feet high and almost half as deep, the most impressive curtain walls in the Free Cities by a fair margin, which made the city brutally costly to assault. The villain, instead of preparing to starve out the defenders, had instead built a set of large stone towers and filled them with siege engines.

The Secretariat had been sceptical these could be a threat and denied him the permit to launch a sortie to disrupt the construction. The Bard had run around their table and tipped over their inkwells in protest, which had gotten all of them thrown out as well as fined for "disruption of order", "miscreantism" and "wanton waste of Secretariat resources". Hedge and Ash had been quite displeased with her afterwards, but the White Knight did not judge. The Tyrant, once the towers were built, had linked them with rope bridges and brought forward the prisoners. Six hundred and sixty-six per tower, men and women and children from Atalante. And just like that, as Hanno watched from the walls, the Tyrant had them butchered like animals. Sacrificed so that the ground around the towers would rise into the air, floating until it was above the height of Delos' walls. They'd been bombarding the city ever since, night and day. The Hedge Wizard, tanned face paling in horror, had tried to compose herself by noting Praesi mages would have done better. They'd only have needed half as many sacrifices per tower.

They'd lost the first district again a fortnight later after Helikean infantry forced the gate under the cover of siege engines, and if the Champion had not fought her way through the host until she could hold the gates by herself for a bell the

city might well have fallen. Hanno had led the counterattack of the beleaguered defenders from the ranks, the Ashen Priestess covering the host with her power so that any wound not mortal would heal within moments. It still might not have been enough, had her sister Hedge not hypnotized the Helikean officers into giving a hundred contradicting orders to their men. The Tyrant's soldiers had been driven out, then the iron gate melted and fused with the stone so it could no longer open. It would not be enough. Hence why Hanno was here on the walls, waiting for a permit.

"You could at least look like you're brooding," the Wandering Bard complained. "At best you're contemplative."

Aoede's feet were dangling off the walls, her ever-present flask in hand. He could smell the hard liquor from where he stood, the breeze carrying it like some toxic fume. The Wandering Bard looked like a hundred other girls from Nicae, full-figured and with dark curls going down to her back, but the stained leathers and the lute slung over her back set her apart. So did the way her liver had yet to kill her. Every Named learned the trick to burn poison out of their bodies early in their career and it could be used to sober yourself up, but as far as he could tell she didn't use it. Interesting, though not as much as the way she sometimes moved between places faster than should be possible. Aoede often acted the fool, but she knew too much to be harmless. Of all the heroes in his band, she was the one he was wariest of. The others had their motivations worn on their sleeves, but the Bard? Behind the haze of drunkenness there was an intent he had yet to figure out.

"Brooding is pointless," Hanno said in tradertalk. "If something distresses you, act upon it. Otherwise you surrender all right to complain."

"So speaks the Choir of Judgement," she said. "Though you're fairly moderate for one of theirs. Most would have executed the upper Secretariat and taken command of the siege after our little tower episode."

He eyed her silently for a moment.

"I do not judge," he finally said. "That is not my Role."

"You're going to be a fun one, I think," Aoede grinned.

Hanno wasn't quite sure how to take that, so he let the matter go.

"Do you have a reason for seeking me out?" he asked.

"Secretariat just validated your permit," the Bard said. "Tonight's the night."

The White Knight looked upwards, at the floating towers and the people manning them.

“Good.”

—

The earth under the towers gave a dim red glow in the dark, though it was not enough that torches and magelights were not used all over the floating platforms. The moon was near-gone tonight and behind clouds to boot, so the dark silhouette of the massive eagle was not greeted with shouts of alarm. Hedge was as graceless in this form as when she was human, but she managed a landing at the feet of the easternmost tower without crashing into the wall. The other three heroes riding her back, tied to it with ropes, slid down quietly. The Bard was gone again, no one knew where. Hanno adjusted the longsword at his belt when the moment he touched solid ground and put on his barbute. The solid steel helmet with the T-shaped opening lacked the protection of a visor, which most warriors preferred when wearing plate as he was, but the White Knight preferred the better visibility. The Champion and the Priestess came to his side a moment later.

Though they were both women, the two were a study in differences. The Ashen Priestess was tall and slender where the Champion was short and bulky, the first aggressively serene where the second always wore a sunny smile. The only commonalities were the tanned skin common to Levant and the Free Cities as well as his own native Ashur and the dark hair – though Priestess wore hers short while Champion kept hers in a thick braid that reached halfway down her back. As befitting of a martial Named the Champion was decked in plate even thicker than his own, her helmet forged to look like a snarling badger. Ash, as her more gregarious sister insisted she should be called, wore a mere coat of silvery mail covering a padded tunic. He could feel the power wafting from it, though it was not sorcery. Names like the Priestess’ relied on the magic of priests instead of mages, that gift of the Heavens that wove miracles beyond understanding.

The shape of the massive eagle shuddered, then collapsed into a kneeling woman. The blood relation between the Hedge Wizard and the Priestess could be seen with even cursory examination, the two sisters sharing much of the cast of their face as well as their build. The eyes were where they differed the most. Ash’s hickory-like eyes were common in the Free Cities but Hedge’s eclectic arcane bag of tricks had come at a cost: one of her eyes was blue, the other a vivid shade of yellow. The mage’s colourful patchwork robes were covered with barely-visible arcane symbols and more pockets than she could possibly be needing. Hedge stayed kneeling for a moment, she coughed out a few feathers.

“Gods,” she gasped. “I’m going to be craving rabbit for weeks.”

Champion helped her up to her feet, then clapped her back. Hanno saw the mage repress a wince.

"Eagle trick, very great," the Levantine heroine said, her tradetalk heavily accented. "Witch can have many rabbits after victory."

"Wizard," Hedge corrected absent-mindedly. "It's a genderless noun."

The Champion ignored that as cheerfully as she usually did.

"We shouldn't linger," Priestess said. "We'll be seen."

Hanno cleared his throat quietly to draw their attention.

"Swiftness will be of the essence," he said. "If they cut the bridges between the towers, this will get much more difficult."

"Kill invaders quick," the Champion agreed. "Then go back for parade."

"You can fill out the paperwork for that, if you want one," Hedge muttered under her breath.

The White Knight grimaced at the thought. It would take at least a fortnight to get the form to request the request form.

"You know the plan," he said. "Let's end this for good."

They moved seamlessly, what they lacked in experience made up by the instincts of their Names. The door at the bottom of the tower was barred but the greataxe the Champion used – almost as tall as she was, and used single-handedly with her large shield on the other hand – smashed it down with a single swing. The hall behind it was swarming with Helikean infantry but Hanno did not waste time engaging them. The Priestess and the Champion would take care of it. Calmly unsheathing his longsword, the White Knight headed for the stairs. A cluster of soldiers tried to get into his way, shields raised, but a trickle of power to his legs had him smashing into the mass of them like a trebuchet stone. They scattered under the impact and Hedge hurried behind him, dropping a ball of multi-coloured light in their midst that exploded into bindings. His first kill of the night came when a spearman atop the stairs thrust the tip towards his head. The flat of his blade slapped away the shaft, then a twist of the wrist buried the point into the man's throat. Without stopping he flicked out the sword, the Wizard pushing the body below when it fell on her.

Hedge's assessment had been that the ritual room would be close to the middle of the tower and she was proved correct: a heavily barred iron door with glowing runes on it was the only thing on the second level. Letting the Wizard finagle her way through the

wards would have taken too long and he could already hear soldiers rushing downstairs, so Hanno drew on his Name. The Light flooded his veins, harsh like a desert wind hollowing out his insides, and it wreathed his hand in a gauntlet. He punched through the iron like it was parchment, ripping out the bar holding the door in place on the other side.

"That's one way to do it," Hedge said.

She hurried inside anyway. The room was covered with ritual symbols, painted in what he was fairly sure was blood. In the centre, surrounded by a pentagram whose every corner bore line joining the broader web of runes, was a single perfect disc of obsidian.

"Stoneglass," the Wizard grimaced. "Of *course* they'd use the most unstable kind of anchor available."

"Is this a problem?" Hanno asked.

"There's a not insignificant chance the ritual will blow up instead of converting," she said.

The White Knight frowned.

"How not insignificant?"

"Eh," Hedge said. "It'll work out. Probably."

He did not think that had been meant to be reassuring, which was good because he was not reassured in the slightest. Before he could reply, the mage muttered something under her breath and strode into the symbols. Immediately a dozen orbs of red light appeared in the air, but the Wizard snapped her fingers and a bluebird slipped out of her sleeve, wings flapping as it chirped merrily. A dozen rays of fire instantly incinerated it, but by the time its ashes fell to the ground Hedge was barely a foot away from the disk. A spherical barrier of transparent force formed around it but the Wizard whispered an incantation and it started flickering until it disappeared entirely. She deftly placed a polished pebble on the disk and backed away hastily.

"We don't have long," she said, absent-mindedly producing a little mirror to catch a ray of fire and turn it back against the orb that had shot it out. "Are the others done?"

Hanno cast an eye down the stairs. There was a plume of ash as Priestess dispersed a man out of existence with a word, and not a single person or object in the vicinity of the Champion remained unbroken. She, at least, seemed to be having a good time.

"More or less," he replied.

He whistled sharply, drawing their attention. The Champion waved, Priestess sighed and immediately began making her way up. Hanno's attention turned to the stairs leading above and he frowned. He'd heard soldiers earlier and prepared himself to cover Hedge's back, but none had arrived. That was not a good sign. The White Knight put a spring to his step and emerged on the third floor, which was abandoned. There was a pair of unmanned ballistae and racks full of projectiles as well as a set of stairs leading to the roof, but no enemies. The threshold to the side led to the rope bridge linking this tower to the next one and he immediately moved towards it. The arrow whistled an inch to the left of his head, the soldiers on the other side of the bridge already in formation. That was no issue, but the way two of them seemed prepared to cut out the bridge was. Instead of pouring more reinforcements into the fight below, the Helikeans had retreated in good order and positioned themselves to cut off their losses if necessary. How unpleasantly competent of them.

Barely a heartbeat had passed since the arrow clattered against stone and Hanno's mind quickened. He would not make it across the bridge in time, which would endanger the entire operation. He would not make it across the bridge in time on *foot*. The White Knight was moving forward before he even thought of it, Name pulsing inside of him. The winds howled through his veins, carving their marks.

**"Ride,"** he whispered.

Light roiled violently by his side, taking shape and flesh until a horse stood – without breaking stride Hanno hoisted himself on it, extending his hand so that the lance of light would form inside it. The horse moved swifter than any mortal mount could have, across the rope bridge within three breaths. The lance pieced through the first soldier's torso, flesh wafting smoke, and a sword stroke sent the other one's head tumbling to the ground. He'd moved quickly enough the Helikeans were too surprised to immediately attack. Hanno let go of the lance, allowing it to disperse, and the horse's hooves caved in the head of the man at the centre of the enemy formation. A heartbeat later the mount was gone and he dropped to his feet, landing gracefully even in plate.

"Fucking Hells," one of the archers in the back exhaled, knocking an arrow.

The longsword cut through both the bow and his throat in the same swing.

"Retreat," an officer barked. "Collapse the next-"

He swallowed his tongue before he could finish, clawing at his throat as he choked. Hedge had caught up. There'd been twelve soldiers, before he'd crossed the bridge. Now there eight, seven

when he caught a man's blade and broke it before his hand snaked out to grab him by the neck. His grip strengthened, the cracking sound heralding another death. These were Helikeans, though. The descendants of the same soldiers who had waged war on the mightiest nation as a single city-state and forced the man to surrender or see Salia burn to the ground. They did not flinch or fail. One allowed his blade to run him through to keep it stuck as the two remaining archers took aim again – only for the first to twitch, then disperse into a cloud of ashes that had the other coughing. Priestess had arrived. By the time the Champion had crossed the bridge with her axe raised, there was no one left alive on that side of the tower. The other two heroines made their way more slowly.

"Kill everyone," the Levantine complained. "Like hog."

"What do pigs have to do with this?" Hedge blinked.

"She means we hogged the kills," Ash said.

"Yes," Champion agreed enthusiastically. "You all big hogs."

"Would you stop calling me a-" Hedge began, tone irritated, before Hanno cleared his throat.

"You can take point, Champion," he told the short woman. "We need to get to the westernmost tower and *fast*."

There were seven towers, in all. The Wizard's overtaking of the ritual on this one would take care of roughly half, but for the destruction to be complete they would need to do the same on the other side. They were on the third story now, where all the rope bridges would lead, so at least there would be no need to move around. That did not simplify matters as much as Hanno would have thought, as he found out. By the time they cleared the third tower, the one they'd landed on had begun to move. There was a deafening sound as it rammed itself into the second tower, half-collapsing but continuing to push it into the third one. At the fourth they found the bridge out already cut when they arrived. Hedge would not be able to turn into the giant eagle again until dawn, and she lacked another form that would carry them all. Priestess managed to craft a thin line of solid light for them to walk across while getting peppered with arrows. The Champion took three in the chest but her Name was remarkably robust: it barely slowed her down. Less than an hour had passed when they arrived to the last tower, but it had still taken much longer than he would have liked.

Behind them three towers had impacted into one large ruin, but the central one was barely touched. Hedge would have to add some momentum to the conversion on this side if they wanted to break the central tower, which she informed him would increase those "not insignificant" chances of blowing up. The seventh tower was

already deserted when they arrived, the rope bridge that used to lead to it having been cut from the sixth tower's side. Magelight could be seen shining through the stairs that led below.

"This is a trap," Priestess said.

"Not even a subtle one," the Wizard added.

"We mighty," Champion argued. "Trap feeble and dim, like Procer soldier."

"It doesn't matter," Hanno said. "We need that tower moving."

And so down they went. There was no iron door here, only a single hall that took up the entire inside of the tower. A banquet hall, as it happened. There was a long table set there, set with a feast that would have fed three dozen people – and it was still warm, by the looks of it. There were five seats set, and one was already filled. The Bard waved.

"You lot really took your time," Aoede said. "I've been here like, forever."

The only other person in the room laughed. Behind the table the same ritual array that Hanno had seen before was reproduced in painstaking detail, save for one difference: at the centre of symbols, the obsidian disk was set on a ridiculously gaudy throne flanked by leering gargoyles. One where a boy was lounging lazily. He couldn't have been more than seventeen, but he looked frail for that age. His limbs were thin and his skin unhealthily pale, his body topped by wispy brown curls bearing a crown of gold with jewels set in them. The boy had a sceptre of ivory across his lap, with a roaring gold lion's head. The Tyrant of Helike smiled at them, his ugly red eye twitching.

"So you'd be the White Knight, then," the boy mused. "And sundry sidekicks. By all means, sit. I've had a meal prepared for you."

"The wine is great," the Bard said. "Fruity, with a hint of arsenic."

"You've had enough of it to kill several villages," the Tyrant commented. "I'm actually impressed."

"Pheasant look good," Champion said.

"Poisoned," Hedge hissed at her in a low voice. "The word you're looking for is *poisoned*."

Hanno ignored them, calmly making his way down the stairs. The villain stirred on his throne, looking at him.

"Is this the part where you rail at my Evil ways?" he asked. "I've been looking forward to that."



"I do not judge," the White Knight said.

The silver coin appeared in his open palm, as it always did. As a child, Hanno had seen the laws of men fail. He'd believed in the citizenship tiers, before he'd seen what they did to his mother. And yet Ashur was on the side of Good, was it not? So many places across Calernia were, and yet injustice was rampant. The thought had tormented him, as a child. How could one tell which laws were just and which were not? Picking and choosing was... imperfect. One's discernment could never be flawless. It was constrained by the events of one's life, the limits of one's intellect. Hanno could have, he supposed, destroyed the laws he'd seen destroy his mother. But what would he have replaced them with? His own beliefs, as fallible as those of the men and women who'd crafted the laws he railed against? That was not rectifying an evil. It was replacing it with a different shade of the same. But he'd found an answer, hadn't he? He flipped the coin, watched it spin in the air. It landed on his palm. The crossed silver swords, not the laurels. The Seraphim had rendered their judgement.

"Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike," the White Knight said, tone eerily calm. "The Choir of Judgement has looked upon the sum of your existence, and found you wanting."

Heat flooded his veins, lighting up his senses. For once, everything felt *right*.

"The verdict is removal from Creation."

The boy cackled madly.

"Now *that's* the stuff, hero," he said.

The Tyrant rose to his feet, twirling his sceptre.

"Bard, play something ominous," he ordered.

Aoede raised a finger, drained the rest of her cup, then picked up her lute. Every other time she'd played in front of Hanno it had sounded like she was committing musical murder but this once, the song ran true. Deep and urgent and dark, like death circling. He almost shivered.

"Your soldiers are dead," the Priestess said, standing by his side.

"You are alone," the Wizard said, hands already tracing runes.

"Your skull make cup," the Champion enthused. "Get me many lovers."

The boy grinned, red eye burning.

"I am the Tyrant of Helike," he said. "Dead or not, *they are in my service.*"

The villain's sceptre pulsed gold and made a sound like a gong ringing. Hazy silhouettes formed in ranks in front of him. Soldiers, all of them. Ranks upon ranks filled the room and they unsheathed their swords, strung their bows. Lances were raised and horses whinnied.

"Shit," Hedge cursed to herself. "We got monologued. Never let them finish the monologue, Hedge, that's how they get you."

The soldiers moved and the White Knight charged. There was a sheen of light to his sword, and not even spectres were beyond his ability to cut. He sidestepped a lance, cut through the apparition's belly and carved through the head of the man-at-arms behind it. The heat built up inside of him, spilling out in motes of power as he killed his way through the host. The Hedge Wizard spat out a stream of smoke that enveloped the spectres in front of her as Priestess wove a circle of sunlight around her that burned the soldiers whenever they neared it. The Champion bashed a spectre's face with her shield, apparently indifferent to the fact that they were intangible. She was not, as far as he could tell, even using her name. The Tyrant's crown lit up and shot a beam of red light at him, because naturally the madman would turn his regalia into a magical weapon, and Hanno grit his teeth as his plate began melting. If it was not lethal, then it was just pain and obstruction. Those he could deal with.

Hedge threw a small ball of fur at the Tyrant that turned into an angry ferret, distracting enough by clawing at his face that the beams ceased. Now would be the time to call on another of his aspects, he knew. But even with the villain distracted, spectres kept appearing faster than they could be killed and the Champion was beginning to get buried. The moment she was, the sisters would be under assault and it was all downhill from there. There were on the Tyrant's chosen ground, and Hanno had seen enough heroes die in the Chamber to know how this would end.

"Hedge," he called out. "Crash the tower."

"We're still *in* the tower," she reminded him.

"Yes," he said patiently. "There's no way we could survive that. *Therefore we will.*"

"Do it, Alkmene," Priestess hissed. "We can't keep this up."

The Wizard cursed again and leapt forward, turning into a sparrow before she hit the ground. She began rising in the air but archers took aim and Hanno hurried towards her – too late, he'd be too late. One after another, the arrows clattered uselessly against the Champion's great shield as she charged *through* a

spectre to get there in time. Casually, she decapitated an apparition and kicked the intangible body into another. The sparrow flew through the melee, weaving around swings and arrows to land in a crash on the obsidian disk. The Tyrant threw a now-dead ferret at her, but taking the stoneglass off the throne had been enough. The tower, after a heartbeat, began to fall. The villain frowned thoughtfully.

"I had something for this," he said. "This tower will be your grave? No, Anaxares said that was second-rate. This isn't over yet?"

The gargoyles flanking the throne animated and began flapping their stone wings, grabbing the Tyrant by the shoulders. The dragged him upwards, heading for the stairs. The boy suddenly inhaled.

"Oh! *I'll get you next time, heroes!*" he said shaking his fist in their direction.

By the time the villain was out the hall, which was still falling, the spectres had dissipated into a thick mist lingering on the ground. Hanno waited until the Wizard had turned back into her proper form.

"I don't suppose putting the disk back will end the freefall?" he asked.

"With the momentum we have going?" she grimaced. "It'll blow up in our faces instantly."

The White Knight sighed. So much for the easy way.

"Everyone, gather close," he said, reaching for his Name.

They did. Hanno closed his eyes and gathered his power, waited for the beginning of the impact that would signal they'd touched the ground.

"Wait, how are you not wounded?" Hedge said. "I saw you take hits."

"Witch not so smart," Champion said. "Ghosts no real, can't hurt."

"*Ignorance is not a magical power,*" the Wizard yelled.

The White Knight felt the shudder under his feet, and instantly released all he'd gathered. The world went white.

## Chapter 3: Demesne

*"You can never have too many tiger pits, Chancellor. That's the same lack of vision that has people say "that's too large a field of energy to absorb" or "calling yourself a living god is blasphemy"."*

– Dread Emperor Malignant III, before his death and second reign as Dread Emperor Revenant

Marchford had come under attack during my absence.

That much became clear as soon as we got in sight of the city. There was no dramatic plume of smoke announcing it but the way the Fifteenth had been deployed was sign enough. The outskirts of the city were untouched but I could see from a mile away that the central plaza had been heavily fortified and was manned with soldiers and siege engines – all of them pointing towards the inside instead of the outside. Juniper had managed to keep life going outside of the restricted zone she'd carved out in the middle of Marchford, to my approval, but that she'd even needed to do this much was telling. I'd learned much about Legion formations, over the last year, and what I was looking at was standard practice for a long-term static defence. Whatever fight had been picked it was not over, even if there was nothing to see right now. Just when things had been starting to pick up for the city, I glared. Typical.

Zombie the Second kept a slow pace, as I was the only mounted member of my party. The Gallowborne were infantry through and through and Hakram, who I would have preferred to be mounted, could not be. Orcs panicked horses just being being close, unless they were trained war destriers. Those were in a short enough supply that any the Legions of Terror could get their hands on were sent straight to Thalassina. The Thirteenth Legion was garrisoned there and, having been raised out of Callowan rebels and criminals, actually had a cavalry contingent. The knights of the Kingdom could have eaten that bunch for breakfast and still been hungry, but compared to the orc wolfriders that represented the Empire's only other mounted option they were still a vast improvement.

"That's two rings of defence," Hakram said. "Whatever tickled the Hellhound was nothing to sneer at: she usually prefers stacking the first line to defence in depth."

Which meant Juniper had to face the serious possibility that her first line of fortifications would be swept away by the opponent. There weren't a lot of forces on Calernia that could threaten a hardened wall of legionaries backed by mages and siege engines. Most of them were supernatural in nature.

"You lost a month's pay, then," I said, squinting at the city ahead. "That's too blatant to be Heiress' work."

"Whoever physically assaulted the city could be a catspaw for her," Hakram said smugly. "It's impossible to prove she *wasn't* involved."

I cursed under my breath. That was the same as people blaming Assassin whenever any prominent figure died – it could be true, in theory, but how the Hells would anyone know?

"You're never going to win, either," I pointed out.

"Until I do," Hakram grinned toothily. "Just a matter of time."

I'd put money on heroes, myself. They always turned up at the most inconvenient of times, and just when Marchford was beginning to have some breathing room would have definitely qualified. No head was on a pike by the road, though, so I could safely assume no hero had gone into my city and committed suicide by Hellhound.

"Did anyone have fairies?" I said.

"Ratface," Adjutant said after a moment.

"I hate it when he places bets," I muttered. "He always knows more than he's letting on."

We'd had to form the pool on the down low, since Juniper frowned on the practice. Something about it diminishing the dignity of officers. The general couldn't technically punish me for anything, but she insisted on hour-long meetings about patrol routes and drills whenever she caught me involved. The Hellhound's sadism knew no bounds. I cast a look at the column of Gallowborne following behind, then sighed.

"Let's pick up the pace," I said. "The sooner I hear the reports, the sooner we can take baths."

Hakram frowned at me.

"I washed in the river not three days ago," he said.

"So now you smell like river *and* wet dog," I said, spurring on Zombie before he could reply. "Soap, Adjutant, soap."

It was rare enough I got to have the last word these days I savoured the feeling all the way to Marchford.

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A patrol met us outside the sight of the city walls, or at least the *promise* of walls. After I'd had the parts of the city wrecked during Battle of Marchford made liveable again, getting some

actual defences for my home built had been a priority. I'd charged Pickler with designing and building the fortifications months ago and she'd had a shiver at the words I was fairly sure was a sign of arousal for goblins – her eyes had gone a little wide and fluttered, too. The first plan the Senior Sapper had drafted would have turned the city into the same kind of army-breaker Summerholm was meant to be, but I'd sent her back to the drawing table after a quick look. Marchford was not a border fortress and while it was to be the seat of the Fifteenth it would live or die on trade. Which her seven overlapping rings of walls and bastions would complicate a great deal: no real thought had been given to civilian streets and arteries, or even housing districts. The second draft had been much more reasonable.

The towered curtain wall around Marchford she'd sketched was nothing too fancy, but where the Talbot Manor had stood before I'd had it torched would become a proper fortress. Permanent barracks were added to accommodate the Fifteenth, with access to training fields for drills and mock battles. That draft I accepted, and mandated she start working on when feasible. That was the first rub, unfortunately: being feasible. Her sappers had been needed to repair the bridge in and out of Marchford, and when that was over simply would not have the numbers to undertake as large a project as building the fortifications for an entire city. Not if I wanted to be done before a decade has passed, anyway. That wasn't acceptable: the entire reason I needed those walls *now* was so that when Heiress tossed her next abomination at me my soldiers would have something to stand on.

The obvious solution was drafting hand from the rest of the Fifteenth, but Juniper had flatly refused. It was one thing to keep sappers busy in peace time, another entirely to draw from the rank and file for a civilian project. Especially when she was integrating a massive influx of Callowans and other fresh recruits into the Fifteenth, trying to turn them into a cohesive fighting force. Fortunately, Marchford was a mining city. There was available skilled labour, which at the moment milled around aimlessly or enrolled into my legion to make ends meet. That was the second rub, so to speak. Those miners would need to be *paid*. I was, sadly, close to broke. There was not enough trade coming in to fill my coffers, and raising tariffs on what was currently coming would just kill it off entirely. Taxing a city who'd effectively been sacked less than a year ago and of which a third of the population had lost their income when the mines closed – courtesy of Heiress fucking me over with a demon whose corruption was still far from gone – was a good way to have revolt on my hands. I still drew my pay and so far had done little to spend it, but it was a drop in the bucket compared to what was needed.

The only saving grace here was that my legionaries also drew pay from the Tower and had nowhere to spend it but Marchford. That had slowed the bleeding some, though there was only so much that

buying ale, whores and grub could do for a city. In the end I'd had Pickler outline the foundations for what would be the city walls and freed her to take care of the bridge. We needed the trade more than the defences, right now. Staring at those ropes and pickets put me in a foul mood, a reminder that soon I'd need to either borrow coin or effectively go bankrupt. I'd ordered Aisha to look into my options before I left for Southpool, so maybe she'd have good news for me. That'd be a first.

I dismissed the patrolling legionaries without bothering to ask questions about what had happened to the city, heading straight for the guildhall Juniper had appropriated during the Battle of Marchford and never returned. On the way there, after having sent off most of the Gallowborne back to the barracks for well-deserved rest, I was presented with the sight of a tired but still ridiculously pretty redhead escorted by a gaggle of mages.

"Lady Squire," Kilian smiled.

I spurred on Zombie instead of replying, scooping up my Senior Mage by the waist and setting her in front of me before she was even done squeaking in surprise.

"Cat," she protested. "We're in-"

One arm still wrapped around her waist, I leaned forward to interrupt her with a kiss. She smiled against my lips before sliding a hand around the nape of my neck and replying in kind. Teasingly, I bit her lip before withdrawing when we were both out of breath.

"Kilian," I finally said. "I missed you."

She rested her head against my breastplate, for once the fact that she was slightly taller than me not apparent.

"Missed you too," she muttered. "Even if you're making a spectacle of us, you utter brute."

Hakram cleared his throat loudly, because he was the most inconsiderate creature ever spawned in Creation. I ignored him, pressing my lips against the crown of Kilian's head and already craving something stronger. I hadn't seen my lover in two months and to say I'd missed her would have been something of an understatement. Hakram cleared his throat again, louder.

"We're having a moment, you sack of sentient manure," I said.

"Good afternoon to you, Senior Mage," Adjutant said, cheerfully ignoring my insult.

"Lord Adjutant," Kilian replied, with as much dignity as she could manage while wrapped in my arms.

"I see you've been abducted by some sort of barbarian warlord," the tall orc mused. "Whenever you manage to free yourself from captivity, I imagine we'll be needing you for the staff meeting with General Juniper."

The redhead wiggled in my arms and reluctantly I allowed her to slid off the horse. Zombie the Second took all of this rather placidly, staring at a food stall on the other side of the street with greedy eyes. Kilian coughed, got her pixie-cut hair in order again and composed herself.

"I was actually sent by Juniper," the Senior Mage said. "The general staff was assembled for a meal, so she's extending an invitation. The most pressing reports could be handled at the same time."

I grimaced. Well, no sense in delaying it. I could go for a bite anyway, there were only so many times you could eat standard Legion rations before wanting to jump off a bridge. *Oh*, and I'd get a real bed tonight. Gods that would be nice. I snuck a look at Kilian, drinking her in even if legion gear was the opposite of enticing. With a little luck I might even have company in that bed, and I was looking forward to that a great deal more than sleep. After I'd learned that our scrying sessions were very likely being listened in on I'd curtailed, uh, certain activities we'd sometimes indulged in when time allowed.

"You're staring, Cat," Hakram said.

"Am not," I lied.

I slid off my saddle and handed Zombie to one of the Gallowborne. Kilian smiled and began moving, Adjutant and I following.

"Killjoy," I hissed at him under my breath before we caught up.

He grinned back unrepentantly. One of these days, I promised myself, I was going to get a minion that didn't give me lip.

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"No wonder you're so small," Nauk said. "Look at the size of those portions."

I pointed my fork at him over my bowl of oxtail stew and sambusa.

"I will end you, you ugly green gargoyle," I promised. "Don't think I won't just because you're a legate now."

Hune rumbled in approval.

"His commander would handle the paperwork more quickly, if she had his rank," the ogre said.



There were no seats capable of accommodating someone the other legate's size, so in the end someone had taken off the back of a stone bench and dragged it inside. Unlike the rest of us, who were taking our portions from the communal bowls, Hune had been brought her own. Considering her side dish of koshari was larger than my torso I could see why.

"I'm not doing the forms for it, if you murder him," Aisha said, daintily picking at her plate from her seat at Juniper's left.

"They'll be handled promptly, don't you worry," I said, and Hakram cursed under his breath.

He should, since they would most definitely end up on his desk instead of mine. The Hellhound speared another slab of uncooked red meat with cumin from the bowl only orcs were using and dropped it on her plate.

"Don't start murdering officers, Foundling," the general said. "I'm told it's habit-forming."

That was almost a joke, and I still wondered at how the orc was willing to unbend even that much in private. Never when anyone but the general staff was there, but it was still like night and day compared to when the Fifteenth had first been formed. Going through the Liesse Rebellion together, all the desperate battles of the campaign, had warmed her considerably towards me and the officers who could once have been considered my "faction" in the Fifteenth. Those old lines were long gone, now. Like Captain had once told me, showing proficiency at violence was the quickest way to earn an orc's respect. Ratface and Kilian were chatting with Pickler further down the table but I refrained from sending a longing look in that direction. There would be time enough for that after we were done eating. I dipped the sambusa in the stew and bit off a piece of the meat-stuffed pastry. Still warm, I hummed in appreciation. Someone had gotten their hands on a decent cook from the Wasteland.

"So," I finally said. "Looks like I missed a battle."

The amiability – or what passed for that with Juniper – slid off my general's face the moment the subject was broached.

"A single skirmish, so far," the Hellhound said. "Fae crossed over from Arcadia in small numbers."

Further down the table, Ratface smothered a grin. The bastard, in all senses of the word. He'd be filling his pockets deep with that one.

"Do we know why?" Hakram asked.

The conversation in the back had petered out when I'd begun the formal part of our meal, and Kilian was the one to field the question.

"They're claiming the land for Arcadia," she said. "Exactly how far their definition of 'the land' extends isn't clear at the moment."

I fished out a piece of ox and popped it into my mouth, chewing thoughtfully and wiping my hands on the cloth afterwards.

"That's a problem," I said. "I'm already using that land."

"We think they're Winter Court," Nauk said. "They used ice, anyway, and they were arrogant little shits."

"They're all arrogant little shits," Juniper grunted. "Wouldn't be fairies otherwise."

Sometimes it was reassuring to see that the vast majority of my officers were even more terrible at diplomacy than I was. Made me look better than comparison, at least.

"No negotiations were attempted so far," Aisha said, the exception to that last thought. "That does not mean, however, they are impossible."

"They did not seem inclined to negotiate, Aisha," Kilian said mildly. "Otherwise we would have tried."

I raised an eyebrow. She must have been on the scene herself, then. I would have been worried, but the redhead knew how to take care of herself. She might lack in power compared to some other mages, but she made up for it in swiftness and control.

"I believe the terms used by Legate Nauk after the introduction were 'fuck off'," the Taghreb said, tone sardonic.

I shot the orc in question a look. He grinned, then shrugged. Well, Nauk had always been more of a blunt tool than precise instrument. There was a place for that. Sometimes it wasn't about how fancy the trick was, it was about how hard you could clobber the other guy. And as far as clubs went, my legate was among the finest.

"Dealing with fae is like dealing with devils," Ratface said. "They always screw you on the technicalities."

"I'm not taking the option off the table," I broke in. "But at the moment, that's not the situation we're looking at. If they're invading our priority is clear."

"Defences," Juniper growled with approval. "Our mages have set up wards, but the reports are the border between Creation and Arcadia is thinning regardless."

I glanced at Kilian, who grimaced.

"That is beyond my knowledge," she admitted. "Apprentice might know more."

"I notice he's not here," I said. "What's he been doing all this time?"

"He cleared out the strongest of the fae to cross and threatened them not to attempt it again," Hune said. "He did not leave his tower before, and has not since. It borders on dereliction of duty."

The ogre's tone was thick with distaste. *Masego*, I sighed internally. *How are you worse at making friends than I am?* Not, I would admit, that Hune was the cuddliest of my merry bunch. She didn't speak much and was easily irritated. I'd had her under my command for about a year and still knew next to nothing about her. Hakram, usually a fount of useful gossip, had nothing to tell me about her either. Quiet, competent, never socialized much even at the College. Nothing I hadn't observed with my own eyes.

"Lord Apprentice is not officially part of the Fifteenth Legion," Juniper said, in the tone of someone who'd had to make that point before on several occasions. "He has no obligation to us."

"I'll talk to him," I said. "Assuming he can't contribute, what do we have on our side of the field if the fae come back?"

Pickler rocked in her chair, which I noted with amusement was stacked with cushions so she'd sit about the same height as the rest of us.

"My sappers have built two rings of fortifications around the plaza, using the existing houses as props. We've installed cast iron foundations on everything, which Senior Mage Kilian informs me should afford them some protection against fae magic," she said. "To target the fae themselves, I've had scorpions of my own design installed and nailed to the rooftops. One of the invaders used strong winds during the incursion, which would limit their effectiveness, so I've also had catapults loaded with sharper-filled iron balls placed behind the second ring."

Pickler seemed as if she wanted to say more, but one look at Juniper and she rethought the notion. I checked with a glance and, predictably, Nauk looked like she'd just slipped him some tongue. Ugh. I should not have inflicted that image on myself.

"We need to consider the possibility those fortifications might be made permanent," Juniper said, thankfully claiming my attention.

"We'll need to redirect civilian traffic through different streets if that's the case," Ratface said. "The plaza sits in the middle of the main artery in and out of Marchford."

I sighed.

"Start looking into it," I ordered. "Wishful thinking isn't going to make this go away."

The Taghreb bastard raised an eyebrow.

"Well," he said, "if you believe some of the stories..."

I looked at Aisha.

"Him you'll do the forms for, right?"

"They're already filled just in case," the Staff Tribune replied without missing a beat.

"Defence is all well and good," Nauk grunted. "But you don't win wars from behind walls."

"Can't send scouts into Arcadia, Legate," the Hellhound said. "Not with the way it warps time. The logistics would see them dead or the information gathered useless."

"So don't send scouts," the large orc said, baring his teeth. "Send an army. We happen to have one of those lying around."

"We don't know enough to commit to that at the moment," I said. "For all we know, this could be a minor incident that will never escalate."

There was a moment of silence at the table. Hakram was the first to snicker, which broke the dam. Laughter splattered over the room, ebbing after a few moments.

"I'll talk to Apprentice, see what he knows," I said, still smiling. "Anything else that's urgent?"

"No Legion business," Juniper said, and that was that.

We dug into the meal properly and I allowed the renewed sounds of chatter to wash over me. It was, I thought, good to be home.

## Chapter 4: Developments

*"The viper that bites a Matron dies poisoned."*

-Taghreb saying

After the table was cleared most of my officers went with it. They had duties to attend to, after all. While Juniper wasn't holding the legion to wartime duty rosters, the influx of fresh recruits in the Fifteenth meant the usual peacetime hours were far less than what was currently being demanded of them – especially with a budding portal to Arcadia in need of garrisoning. Of the four that remained seated at the table when servants brought wine, only two were a common fixture at these little meetings. Ratface and Aisha effectively ran what passed for my network of informants, through his underworld connections and her relatives in the nobility. They'd done well, in my opinion, but they were going up against spymasters who'd had decades to place their own people or outright inherited a web of informants from their predecessors. Spies were among the most precious parts of a noble's inheritance, in the Wasteland.

Pickler, on the other hand, was a rarity. As much because she had no interest in these things as because she rarely had anything to contribute. That she'd stuck around would have surprised me, had I not remembered the Empress' warning: I was going to be presented with an offer by the Matron of the High Ridge tribe. Pickler's mother, allegedly estranged. I didn't know much about that situation save for assurances I'd received that having Pickler in the Fifteenth wouldn't mean a Matron would be looking to slide a knife in my back. Robber, usually maliciously eager to gossip, had been tight-lipped when I'd brought it up. Goblins always closed ranks the moment you brought up anything relating to what went on inside the Grey Eyries. Still, I could guess at the shape of it. Pickler's open and vehement distaste for politics could not have gone over well back home, or her lack of interest in anything that didn't involve building new and improved ways to kill people.

Kilian was around more often, as my Senior Mage. Since she had a finger in everything from our magical defences to setting up scrying channels her input was occasionally needed. And with Apprentice so often holed up in his tower these days, she served as our expert in the supernatural when he wasn't around. Her knowledge wasn't nearly as expansive, I had to admit, but she'd placed highly in the War College's mage courses for a reason. Where Masego would have a tailored solution to any problem we encountered, Kilian simply hammered in obstacles with group rituals and repeated spellwork. Less elegant, maybe, but I didn't want my legion to ever become too dependent on Apprentice. When it came to fights he'd be at my side more often than not, and it wouldn't do for my mages to become ineffective whenever he wasn't

around. There was a reason my teacher deployed Warlock as a combat asset on his own instead of the leader of other mages.

That made for six of us in the room, if you counted Hakram and myself. There'd never been any debate about Adjutant being there, of course. At this point not having the tall orc at my side felt like I was missing a hand. I'd noticed over the last year that Hakram rarely spoke in meetings, not unless he wanted a point clarified for my benefit, and did not often venture his own opinion. Sometimes he gave it to me in private afterwards, but more often than not he simply kept his peace. Hakram listened and waited and when I came to a decision he saw that turned into a plan of action. It made it easy to rely on him, that I knew he had no objective – hidden or not – he was working towards. Of all the people I was close with, he stood alone in this. I accepted the cup of Vale summer wine Ratface poured from the carafe, allowing myself to savour the taste. It was a little early in the day, admittedly, but I was going to need a godsdamned drink if we were going to talk about the mess currently known as Marchford.

"So, watcha got for me," I prompted.

The two Taghreb traded looks. For all that their relationship had apparently imploded years ago, in my experience they actually got along fairly well. Ratface inclined his head and Aisha cleared her throat.

"The upheaval in the Wasteland continues," the Staff Tribune said. "The mass defections started by the High Lady of Aksum, while slowing in frequency, have yet to end."

I grinned. It always put me in a good mood when I heard about the Truebloods get the bad end of the stick. Not long after I'd extorted three high nobles into backing the creation of the Ruling Council, one of them had officially withdraw from the Truebloods. High Lady Abreha of Aksum, the cackling old bat who'd cheerfully betrayed her fellows the very moment the wind had turned. Though she had not joined the Loyalists, Malicia's faction in Praes, losing a High Lady had started an avalanche of setbacks for the Truebloods. Lesser nobles had begun withdrawing their support or been assassinated by successors who did before a fortnight had passed. While few of them changed their allegiance to the Loyalists, the humiliation for the remaining Truebloods had been both public and potent. I'd watched all of that unfold with no small amount of glee.

"The most recent defection was by a lord directly sworn to Wolof," Aisha said. "As High Lady Tasia is the head of the Truebloods, the loss of face involved was massive. Rumour has it she could not afford to match the bribe offered by the Empress, which has... interesting implications."

I let out a whistle.

"We've confirmed Heiress has made no attempt to send any of the revenues collected from Liesse to the Wasteland," Ratface added. "Cat, I think there's a wedge there."

"Praesi stabbing Praesi in the back," Pickler said derisively. "There's a surprise."

Aisha raised an eyebrow.

"An interesting comment, coming from a goblin," she said.

Pickler shrugged, then looked away. That was as much as she seemed to want to get involved, at the moment.

"And all these unaligned nobles, what are they doing exactly?" Hakram asked.

Aisha smiled, then gracefully sipped at her wine. I could see no hint of her teeth as she did – that was Praesi etiquette for you.

"They are no longer unaligned," the Staff Tribune said. "High Lady Abreha has begun to gather them under her banner."

"The Moderates, they call themselves," Ratface added.

I raised an eyebrow.

"That's a promising name, but I'm not getting my hopes up," I said.

"The Moderates oppose certain of the policies championed by the Empress," Aisha said, "but do so without the undercurrent of opposing the Empress herself. They're growing as an alternative to the Truebloods for nobles who disagree with certain recent reforms."

The approval in her voice was not masked in the slightest.

"So they're the good, polite racists," Pickler said bitingly. "There's a relief, I thought there were only bad, rude ones."

"One does not need to hate greenskins to realize breeding restrictions on the Tribes are necessary," Aisha replied, tone aggressively mild. "Or to believe that orcs chieftains being made nobility would disrupt a very delicate balance of power."

"It probably helps, though," the Senior Sapper said with a flash of needle-like teeth.

"That's enough of that," I said quietly. "Pickler, you know Aisha's not one of *those* nobles. She's never treated you anything but politely. Aisha, half your people would accept making a bridge out of dead goblins as a decent way to save on stone. She's not swinging out of the blue."

The Taghreb noble's face went blank, but she inclined her head. Pickler grabbed her goblet and drank.

"I do love these little chats of ours," Ratface said. "But I believe there's one last thing for you to mention, Aisha?"

The lovely Staff Tribune cleared her throat.

"Infighting between the Truebloods and the Moderates has already begun, but their agents at court do agree on one prominent matter," she said.

Well, that ought to be good.

"I'm on the edge of my seat," I said drily.

"To be blunt," Aisha said delicately, "that point is *you*. You are worrying them."

"She's had knives at her back since she became the Squire," Hakram said calmly. "What makes this unusual?"

"When you were merely the Squire, Lady Catherine, you were a minor threat with the potential of turning into a larger one," the olive-skinned aristocrat said. "Your coming to command the Fifteenth, while unfortunate, was not judged overly alarming. That changed, however, when the Fifteenth *kept growing*."

"They think you're amassing a private army to come knocking at their doors," Ratface grinned nastily. "Their tender noble hearts are all aflutter at the notion."

"That's absurd," Kilian spoke up from my left. "We don't have nearly the men for that. We're what, six thousand now?"

"Seven thousand as of the census last week," Aisha said. "By my estimate, we'll be eight thousand come summer. The size of two standard legions."

"I don't have the corresponding number of mages under my command," the redhead frowned.

I frowned, then pieced the discrepancy together.

"Mages are required to graduate from the College before service," I said. "We've been taking in Callowans."

"There simply aren't that many mages available for us to bring into the fold," Aisha agreed. "Many went to the Fourteenth when it was formed, and there are rumours a Sixteenth is about to be raised."

That, I realized with a grimace, was a problem. A lot of the legion military doctrine rested on the fact that mages and



sappers would be available in proportionate numbers to the amount of regulars. No wonder Juniper was insisting on drills so much. She was going to have to revise her tactics entirely before we next got into a fight.

"I don't suppose any of you have a workaround?" I asked.

"We could recruit from civilian talent," Aisha said. "That would bring complications, however."

"Good mages in the Wasteland have patrons," Ratface said. "They're not allowed *not* to."

"And they'd need to be trained to Legion standards," Kilian murmured. "We don't have the facilities for that. Not to mention using the War College's methods without sanction would be low treason, at the very least."

"Joy," I muttered. "Think about it anyway. If you have a stroke of genius, you know where my door is."

Hakram set down his wine with a metallic clink.

"Practically speaking, what does the nobles being worried about our numbers mean?" the tall orc gravelled.

Ratface shrugged, looked at the other Taghreb in the room.

"Support for the only visible check on your power," Aisha said.

"Heiress," I said.

Well, wasn't that a treat. It would have been too much to hope for I'd be allowed to expand my ranks without there being consequences, I supposed. I passed a hand through my mess of a hair, which I'd taken out of its usual ponytail for the meal. It would need combing soon. Kilian nudged me with her knee under the table, smiling.

"We'll find a way," she murmured. "We always do."

I pressed a kiss against her shoulder as Ratface rolled his eyes and Aisha politely looked away. Acknowledging the sight of emotions in others was impolite, for Praesi, unless you were deeply intimate with them and behind closed doors. Pickler was looking at us like she would some sort of strange chimera, more puzzled than anything else. The goblin notion of romance, as I understood it, was rather different from the human one.

"That's one," I said. "Ratface?"

"Are we done already?" the Taghreb said. "It was just getting interesting."

His lips tightened immediately afterwards, swallowing a whimper, and Aisha smiled. I suspected he was going to be limping out of the room when we were done. The bastard coughed.

"I've placed people in the lower rungs of two of the major Dark Guilds," he said.

While there were apparently quite a few minor criminal associations that styled themselves guilds, there were only three in Callow that really deserved the name. The Assassins, the Thieves and the Smugglers. The Thieves had been the ones to make it through the Conquest the least affected, and the first to strike a deal with Black. Their activities were tacitly allowed as long as they didn't threaten Praesi interests, in exchange for a few concessions. The only really important one among those was informing on any resistance group they came across. No wonder my teacher hadn't been actually challenged by one of those in the two decades he'd run Callow. He really had eyes everywhere, didn't he?

The second guild, the Smugglers, had not gotten away unscathed. Not because the Tower had tightened the screws, at least not in the usual sense. They'd been making a fortune out of importing Praesi luxuries before the Conquest, but their roles as middlemen had become unnecessary when actual trade routes had opened. Making it worse, quite a few drugs and substances that had been illegal under the Kingdom were nothing of the sort under Praes. After floundering for a few years, they'd managed to find a niche in importing foreign luxuries through Mercantis while bypassing tariffs – the Wasaliti, after all, was no longer patrolled by war barges. Their following attempts to get weapons into Callow had been met by the assassination of half their leadership, and they'd taken that warning to heart. Since they'd restricted their activities to what wouldn't earn Black's attention, offering a cut of their profits in penance. They were a pale shadow of what they'd used to be, though, by far the weakest of the three guilds.

The Assassins had happened upon a middle ground between those two, neither crippled nor largely untouched. Their more patriotic elements had been purged by the Named who exemplified their trade, leaving only hardened professionals behind. Those had shown no qualms in cooperating with the Tower and even some Imperial Governors, though assassinating Praesi without unofficial sanction had been forbidden. While not as numerous and entrenched as it had been before the Conquest, the Guild of Assassins had settled comfortably into its new role. They had, if anything, thrived under the rule of officials coming from a culture where their trade was not only accepted but held in some esteem. Few nobles of the Kingdom would have ever contracted a Dark Guild for work, after all, but Praesi were not above

employing local talent when bringing in their own specialists would have been too costly.

"The Smugglers were easy enough to infiltrate, since I've had indirect dealings with them in the past," Ratface said, shaking me out of my thoughts. "As for the Thieves, getting a foot in was doable but rising in the ranks will take years. They tend to operate in local cells."

"You couldn't get anyone in the Assassins?" I asked.

The handsome Taghreb shook his head.

"They recruit by invitation only," he told me. "Murder convicts, mostly, taken in by spiriting them out of prison before they hang."

I made an understanding noise. That would make it tricky to get anyone inside. If Black had managed the feat, he'd never told me.

"Got anything out of it so far?" I said.

"Nothing all that useful, though one piece does stand out," Ratface mused. "The Guild of Thieves has recently had a change of leadership. Their 'King of Thieves' was overthrown."

"A shadow war across Callow would have been noticed," Hakram said.

"They don't operate like that," the Supply Tribune said, shaking his head. "The person in charge is whoever has some fancy crown. Any member of the guild can try to steal it."

I raised an eyebrow. That seemed like a horrible way to run an organization, considering anyone close to the guildmaster would be tempted to steal it. Besides, all it took was for an idiot to get lucky once and you'd have a fool at the helm. Aisha made an approving noise and I glanced at her. Ah, of course she'd think well of it. Praes was run on basically the same principle, only with more murder and demons.

"Keep an eye on them," I finally said. "I'll want to know where they stand when we move on the Assassins."

Ratface nodded.

"Speaking of," he said, "I found out what you wanted. They've none or negligible presence in Marchford."

"Well, I was due something uplifting," I muttered. "Any idea why?"

"The Countess Marchford hated them deeply," Aisha said. "She cleared them out of the city a few years after the Conquest, after they killed her husband and infant son."

I leaned forward in interest.

"How?" I asked.

"She torched the entire city quarter they operated out of," Ratface told me grimly. "Had anyone that crawled out of the ashes drawn and quartered in the public square."

Well. Not exactly something I could replicate across Callow. Horrifying as that method was, I couldn't help but be somewhat impressed. Elizabeth Talbot had not been one to fuck around, when she wanted something done. The Duke of Liesse had no business ever getting near a throne, but the Countess Marchford would have made the kind of queen that took more than a page in chronicles. Not all of it good but, Hells, who was I to throw stones?

"My turn?" Pickler asked impatiently.

I looked at the two Taghreb, but neither of them had anything to add.

"Good," the goblin muttered, then straightened in her seat. "Lady Foundling of Marchford, I bring an offer from Matron Sever of the High Ridge tribe."

I watched my two Tribunes from the corner of my eye. Ratface looked surprised and concerned. Aisha's brow rose, until her eyes widened in understanding. Then her face returned to pleasant and unreadable. *Something that passed through Court at some point, then*, I thought. I'd been under the impression goblins stayed out of Praesi politics, so my curiosity sharpened.

"I've got an official letter for you to gawk at," Pickler continued, discarding ceremony as quickly as she'd taken it up, "but the gist of it is this: the High Ridge tribe and its allies would like to establish a goblin settlement in your lands."

I blinked.

"What?" I said, for eloquence was one my foremost virtues.

I paused.

"Is that even *legal*?"

"The Empress reinstated breeding restrictions to show favour to the Moderates," Aisha said quietly. "In a gesture of goodwill, however, she allowed the establishment of a new goblin tribe for the first time in two hundred years."

"Matrons fought over the right like a bag full of angry cats," Pickler shrugged. "Mother's the most vicious old bitch of that pack of vicious old bitches, though. She ended up on top of that pile of bodies."

"There's never been a goblin settlement outside of the Grey Eyries before," Hakram said, sounding surprised.

I glanced at him.

"Foramen," I reminded him.

"Foramen has been ruled by humans since the Miezan occupation, even if goblins work the forges," the tall orc replied.

That... might be true? I really had no idea. Praesi history not related to the Tower wasn't something I'd read a lot of. Anyway, no point in quibbling since odds were he was right and this wasn't the most salient issue at the moment anyway. My eyes returned to the Senior Sapper.

"That's an," I started, looking for the word, "... interesting offer."

"She doesn't expect you to accept out of love for goblinkind," Pickler said, amused. "She's offering for the goblins in question to build fortifications for the city, free of charge. The tribe would occupy the designated land but pay rent for the privilege, as well bribe you generously for your generosity in considering the matter. Everybody knows Marchford's ledgers are bleeding like slow raider."

I felt it safe to assume the raider in question was bleeding because he'd been too slow to dodge a knife. That expression told me a lot about how what living in the Grey Eyries would be like.

"I've been looking into ways to fill the coffers," I said, glancing at Aisha.

The lovely tribune shook her head.

"While I find the notion of a tribe of goblins within sight of where I sleep horrifying, none offered terms you would find acceptable," she said. "There's quite a few families willing to make a loan, and some are even willing to forego interest. All want a governorship as part of the deal."

"Come on," I griped. "There's got to be at least one that just wants to fleece me."

"With almost no remaining Praesi governors, anyone who could secure such a post under your reign would gain a massive advantage against their rivals," Aisha said. "None are willing to forego that chance. I have, however, accumulated some funds when

they attempted to bribe my intermediaries. The appropriate portion was added to your treasury.”

“That’s something, I guess,” I said, reluctantly amused.

The mirth died quickly enough when my gaze returned to Pickler.

“You talked about rent,” I said. “Not a grant of land.”

“While swearing fealty to you would have been hard enough to swallow,” the Senior Sapper said, “The possibility that one day a male descendant of yours might rule Marchford pretty much killed that idea.”

She shrugged.

“They’re not wrong,” the yellow-eyed goblin said. “It’d be pretty disgusting for a Matron to take orders from a man.”

“I’m feeling somewhat insulted, right now,” Ratface mused.

Pickler eyed him pityingly.

“You’re a fine warleader, Ratface,” she reassured him. “You’re just not cut out for important matters like ruling or raising children. Men are too emotional for those things, it’s not your fault.”

“Matrons have taken orders from Dread Emperors,” I pointed out, morbidly fascinated.

I’d always known the Tribes were a matriarchy, but I’d never actually *seen* that in action before. Pickler was a clever, intelligent and talented officer. Who’d somehow come to believe that barring half her people from leadership positions could be anything but shooting herself in the foot.

“Tyrants don’t count,” she said, eyeing me sceptically. “They’re Named. They’re not like other men.”

“So you’re telling me an entire culture recognizes me as objectively better than Ratface?” Hakram said, leaning forward.

I snorted.

“You’re a traitor to your gender, Hakram,” the Taghreb said. “For shame. Where’s the solidarity?”

“I recognize you’re objectively better than Ratface,” Aisha told Hakram. “I’m sure I could get a petition passed around to collect broader opinion.”

“So I’m to leave this room both without all my toes unbroken *and* my dignity?” the bastard mused. “You people are animals.”

Pickler sneered in the general direction of the gallery before returning her attention to me.

"Think it over," she said. "Left the letter in your affairs, since I didn't want to bother remembering all the legalese. They'll expect an answer soon."

I nodded slowly. I had no intention of agreeing to anything before talking it over with a few other people, anyway. That the Empress had allowed this at all meant she tacitly endorsed the idea, but scrying her for a conversation wouldn't be a bad idea. Getting Black on the other side of a bowl would be even better, but I had no real way to contact him. Pickler slid down her pile of cushions and saluted me before stalking away. Aisha and Ratface took the hint, and made their exit not long after. Hakram was polishing off the rest of his wine, so I turned to Kilian. Who was already looking at me, I was pleased to see.

"So, Senior Mage," I said. "When do you get off duty?"

"I've no responsibilities until afternoon tomorrow," she replied with a smile.

I raised an eyebrow.

"How'd you manage that?" I asked.

"I forewent my free days for the last month," Kilian said. "Though I did manage to walk the city a bit before that."

"Oh?" I said, fingers toying with the edge of her tunic.

"Found a little shop in the merchant district," she said idly. "They do very interesting things with lace."

My breath caught. Smiling impishly, she leaned closer.

"I'm wearing one of their creations right now," she murmured.

I rose to my feet.

"And we're done here," I announced.

Catching Kilian by the hand I immediately headed for the door but paused when I passed by Adutant.

"Hakram," I said. "My buddy. My friend."

"Cat?" he replied bemusedly.

"I've been sleeping in an empty bed for two months," I said. "If someone knocks at my door before noon tomorrow for anything short of an invasion, I will have them *hanged*."

Kilian snorted, and we were out of the room before the orc could reply.

—

I woke up in the middle of the night.

The armful of redhead at my side was still asleep and my pillow was decadently soft after having been on the road so long, so I closed my eyes and buried my head back into it. Someone banged on the door again, more urgently this time. I cursed, then got up. Kilian's eyes fluttered open.

"Cat?" she asked sleepily.

"Go back to sleep," I said. "I'll be back in a moment."

I almost went to open the door before remembering I was naked. Picking up a shirt from the pile of dirty clothes I really needed to have laundered at some point, I slipped it on. The asshole on the other side of the door banged again. Adjusting the shirt to it covered my thighs, I made my way to the door and wrenched it open. On the other side, a legionary with lieutenant stripes stood with his hand raised.

"*What?*" I hissed at him.

The Soninke took in the sight of me dishevelled, half-asleep and entirely furious before gulping nervously.

"Lady Squire, the Winter Court is attempting to invade the city," he managed to get out. "General Juniper sent me to wake you."

I sighed, then rubbed the bridge of my nose. One of these days, I was going to learn to keep my fucking mouth shut.

## Chapter 5: Beachhead

*"Look at how edible you are. You're basically asking for it."*

-Warlord Grog the King-Eater, addressing the king of Okoro during the sack of the same

"So what are we looking at?" I asked.

I took my helmet when Hakram offered it, clasping the chin straps as I checked the longsword sheathed at my belt. The moon was out in full, but it was hard to tell given how many torches there were out in the streets. Legionaries were evacuating the citizens of Marchford according to Juniper's prepared plan as we made our way through the streets, half the Gallowborne behind me. The rest was still assembling under Tribune Farrier. They'd catch up eventually. I wasn't sure whether I'd want them to follow me into



the fray, anyway, but if nothing else they'd be able to bolster our lines.

"The first defensive perimeter collapsed almost instantly," the tall orc said. "Hune's men dug in behind the second one, but they're out of their breadth here."

I could see the blizzard that had overtaken the central plaza of my city even from where I stood, a column that went high into the sky like some cheap snow imitation of the Tower, so Adjutant's words struck me as a bit of an understatement. I'd pit the Fifteenth against anything that had feet or claws, but you couldn't stab the weather. Well, they couldn't anyway. I might be able to work something out. In my experience, you could stab pretty much anything if you tried hard enough. Now *there* was a decent motto for the freshly-founded Noble House of Foundling. If I ever got around to having any descendants – and I wasn't planning on it, at the moment – I'd have it put up on a spiffy banner for when they inevitably got into a fight way out of their league. A legacy to be proud of.

"No shit," I said. "I meant what kind of forces are they fielding?"

"Infantry," Adjutant said. "Every single enemy soldier should be considered a mage, and their weapons look primitive but they have no trouble cutting through ours."

"You'd think people would get tired of that gimmick," I sighed. "Anyone looks like they're in charge?"

"Not as of the last report I got," Hakram replied. "I'm guessing if there's a leader they're either still in Arcadia or hidden by the storm."

We turned the corner, a line of legionaries moving aside with hasty salutes so they wouldn't get in our way. I nodded absent-mindedly, not really paying attention.

"They have wings, right?" I asked, making a gesture that was meant to represent flapping butterflies but came across as mildly obscene.

"That's how they overran the first perimeter," Hakram agreed soberly. "Headed straight for Pickler's scorpions to take them out then spread across the rooftops. Hune moved crossbowmen to box them in, it's working for now."

That did not feel like a long-term solution. Eventually they'd find a way to get through and there was no way I was allowing a bunch of fae to run wild in Marchford. Gods, just thinking of the cost of rebuilding after a rampage was enough to make me feel faint. Why were my enemies never considerate about collateral

damage? Admittedly I'd ordered Marchford Manor torched myself, but I sure as Hells wasn't taking the blame for the devils and that walking horror Heiress has set on the city.

"Mages can't do anything about that?" I said.

"They're busy making sure the blizzard goes up instead of covering the city," Adjutant said. "They're working on shutting it down entirely, but whatever's making it packs a punch."

"Have you—"

"Sent a runner to Apprentice before I even caught up to you," the tall orc interrupted me.

Hakram, you prince among men. Always on the ball. If there was someone could make this mess less of a mess — or at least someone else's mess — it was Masego. I wasn't all that eager to head into a snowstorm without someone who could make fire at my side, truth be told, cloak over my plate or not. If the Fair Folk wanted to make it snow, I wasn't above retorting with a whiff of the ol' brimstone. We were close to the plaza, now, and I could feel the temperature steadily dropping. Joy. The two of us slowed when a legionary popped out of the woodworks and immediately headed in our direction, dropping a knee when she got in front of me.

"Countess," the young Callowan said.

"Up," I ordered. "You were sent for us?"

"Legate Hune conveys her respect and would like to inform you the southern part of our formation is close to collapse," the light-skinned girl said.

Gods, how old was she? Seventeen at most. Barely two years younger than me but she felt like a kid, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and one bad day away from getting on a battlefield she wouldn't walk away from.

"She has reinforcements headed there?" Hakram asked.

"We're stretched thin until Legate Nauk moves his men into place," the messenger replied. "She fears what she can spare will not be enough."

Well, *fuck*. Hune had three thousand soldiers under her command — one time and a half the size of what a kabili should be — and she was still hard-pressed? Given the relatively small size of the area she had to contain, that meant the fae were tearing through her men like wet parchment.

"We're close," Hakram said, eyeing me.

"We're going," I replied. "Tell the legate as much."

The girl got to her feet and saluted as I turned to the Gallowborne behind me. The officer at their head was an orc, one of the few in my personal guard.

"Lieutenant Sark," I called out.

"Ma'am?" the officer replied.

"Send word to Tribune Farrier: we're headed south. He's to back up the lines there immediately. Same for your men."

The greenskin eyed me calmly.

"You'll be going into the storm, ma'am?"

"Looks that way," I grunted. "Gotta get at whatever's in there."

He grinned, showing off yellowing fangs.

"Good hunting, Warlord."

See, stuff like that was like I liked having orcs backing me. No insistence on coming along or waiting for Apprentice, just an encouragement to go out and kill things that wanted to kill me. I didn't waste time on any further talk: we moved double-time for where the enemy assault was apparently the strongest.

—

Legion doctrine for static defence was fairly straightforward. Establish a shield wall of heavies everywhere without walls, place sappers and mages behind it to disrupt enemy formations. Most of the killing was actually behind the melee, by bolts and fireballs shot into the massed enemies. Unfortunately, both the Miezian legions and the Praesi inheritors had crafted that tactic relying on one assumption the Fifteenth was currently paying for: that they would have more or better spellcasters on the field than the enemy. The Empire was the only nation on Calernia with a formal mage corps in their army, so they usually had at least twice the number of spellslingers the enemy did if not more, and the Miezian empire had been *built* on sorcery the likes of which had never been seen before or since. Neither nation had ever tangled with the fae, and it was showing.

Instead of the orderly shield wall I was expecting, I was currently looking at half a dozen clumps of legionaries desperately trying to fight off the enemy while fairies darted past them to take a bite out of my panicking sappers. The sharp cracks of munitions and disorderly crossbow fire announced the death of a few more of my goblins every few heartbeats. I was confused at how the fae could have managed to break a shield wall without one of their own until the first time I saw some dark-skinned man dressed in furs glow as he spoke and a human walking

out of formation as if in a trance, just to get speared through the throat. The Winter Court was falling on my men like a pack of wolves, using ice and illusions and charm to break them apart and pick them off one at a time. The defensive formations of Hune's men were not a rampart so much as a buffet the enemy could choose from at will.

Most of the fairies were shaped like eerie humans with wings, though not all. Wolf-like hounds made of ice and shade wove in and out of sight, tearing out throats and mauling men over their shields. The only saving grace of that disaster I was watching was that it wasn't also in the middle of a blizzard. Silver lining, eh?

"That is *not* how I saw my night going," I admitted.

"They're probably smarter than devils too," Hakram growled with distaste.

My longsword came out of its scabbard without a sound and I move forward with my shield raised. Adjutant's axe and scutum immediately moved to cover my left flank as the Gallowborne spread out in ranks behind us. Hune's sappers took cover behind them as soon as they could, retreating with relief, and then a heartbeat later I was in the thick of it. A pale-skinned woman in a flowing blue dress that shimmered like a mirror leapt in my direction, a bone sword in hand. I breathed in, breathed out, and felt my Name stir. The beast grinned, eyes opening: my veins warmed and the world slowed. *Hello, old friend. Would it be strange to say I've missed you?* The sharp point of bone was headed straight for my throat, uncaring of the gorget protecting it, and I wasn't taking the risk of letting that blow land. The flat of my sword lightly tapped the fae's wrist, nudging the strike away, then with a flick of the wrist came around to tear straight through my enemy's throat. I had at no point ceased moving forward. A heartbeat later, the fae's headless corpse fell to the ground behind me.

Weeping Heavens, it was good to be back in the field.

To my left Hakram sunk his axe into the head of a shadow hound, hard enough shards of ice flew and its muzzle hit the ground. With a grunt he tore it out, then brought down an armoured boot on the creature's neck to make sure it wouldn't get up. I could feel myself smiling, the battle-joy taking hold of me. Gods, after all this talking I'd been forced to do lately it was such a delight just being able to *hit* something. The Gallowborne were advancing steadily behind us, picking off any fae trying to charm them with crossbows before they could get too close. The fairies swarmed in the air above them, but my personal guard was made of sterner stuff than that. They'd been through Marchford and Liesse: a bunch of fae weren't going to make them flinch. I left them to it, moving towards Hune's besieged legionaries. Ragged

cries of "Fifteenth" came when they saw me, and they threw themselves back into the fray with fresh ferocity. That drew some attention. The fae, strange translucent wings flapping, hovered in front of me. I genuinely could not tell what gender it was, if it even had one.

"Let go of your weapon, sweet one," it crooned.

My shield smashed it in the face, breaking its nose with a brutal crunch. Huh, so fae *did* bleed red. You learned something every day. I started speaking again, so I hit it again with morbid fascination.

"Here, have it," I replied drily, ramming my sword through its chest.

"Don't play with your food," Hakram chided absent-mindedly.

His axe went clean through a wild-haired fae with two spears of shadow, then when it fell the bottom of his shield came down on her head repeatedly until it was nothing more than bloody pulp.

"I'm not impressed with the calibre so far," I said. "Enemies that weak shouldn't have broken our lines."

Immediately after saying that, I hunkered behind my shield and braced for impact. The tip of a bronze spear punched through the steel, an inch away from my right eye, and I grinned. I'd had a feeling that would hurry things along. I ripped my arm out of the leather straps binding it to the shield, stepping back as I took a look at my opponent. Male, wearing an armour of twisted dead wood. Couldn't see much of him aside from long dark hair and entirely blue eyes staring at me like I was an insect. Eh. I'd gotten more scathing disdain from Praesi nobles, he'd have to step up his game if he wanted to make a dent. There was a bronze sword at his hip, still sheathed. I flicked my wrist and the contraption of steel wires Pickler had built me triggered, dropping my knife on the palm of my gauntleted hand. If I triggered it differently, it could even shoot the knife like an arrow. My Senior Sapper made the best toys. There were another three fae decked in the same armour at the new one's side, fanning out to flank Hakram and I.

"Nauk described a female with the same gear as responsible for the last blizzard," Adjutant said, hefting his axe over his shoulder.

"Four heavy hitters, then," I frowned. "Someone's looking to make an impression."

The first deadwood soldiers ripped his spear out of my shield, then laughed. It wasn't a human laugh, or even a person's. It

sounded like the ice of a lake cracking come spring, like frost sharply spreading over glass.

"Children," he mocked, and though he was speaking no language I knew I understood him perfectly. "We are the footsoldiers of Winter. The Sword of Waning Day. Die screaming."

"Oh hey, a pack of flunkies with a fancy name," I deadpanned. "Never slaughtered my way through one of *those* before."

They moved as one. Before the first exchange was even done I was very, very glad I'd scrapped with the Hunter before. I'd had precious little training against opponents using spears save for my fights with the hero, and if I hadn't learned to read movements from that I'd likely have earned a gaping hole through my shoulder within the first five heartbeats of the fight. The two deadwood soldiers who focused on me were quick, light on their feet and worst of all they knew how to work together. Soldiers, I decided, might not be the right word no matter what they called themselves. They were like hunters, harrying a prey into position so the finishing blow could be struck. Unfortunately for them, they were going to have to reconsider their position in the food chain of Creation. I closed the distance with the one who'd spoken, getting in up and personal where his choice of weapon was more hindrance than help. I nearly ate a bronze shaft in the teeth but instead ducked under it, sliding my knife into the armour about where his lower ribs should be.

The goblin steel bit into the wood but failed to punch through. Not regular wood, then. Everybody always got these fancy enchanted things, it was godsdamned unfair. I had to dance away when a spear tip pierced through where the back of my leg was a heartbeat before, then sharply twist my footing when when the first deadwood soldier went for my throat. They were too quick, I thought. In plate I wasn't able to keep up, and my armour might as well be silk for the difference it would make if they landed a hit. I heard Hakram bellow and glanced in his direction: he had a spear through the leg, though he'd traded that for his axe buried in one of the fae's neck. Right between the helmet and armour. It did not slow the enemy down, to my dismay. The deadwood soldier simply ripped out the axe, tossed it away and unsheathed her sword. Adjutant spat to the side, threw his shield in her face and took the spear out of his leg. He did not look concerned in the slightest about how he was bleeding.

My momentary distraction was costly. I saw the spear blur from the corner of my eye and hastily slapped the shaft to the side with the flat of my sword, but I'd missed the other one: it punched straight through my plate, then my knee, then entirely through and into the pavement. I was stuck where I was like a bloody pig on a spit. The soldier who'd hit me unsheathed his

sword as the other one, the one who'd spoken, drew back his spear as it became coated with frost. This was the most pain I'd been in in over a year, and for a moment I focused on biting down on a scream. Then I watched a frosted spear head moving with unnatural swiftness towards my head, the whole world narrowing down to that one threat. I was not going to be able to dodge that, I knew. All the lessons I'd learned from some of the most celebrated killers of our age flashed through the back of my mind, but I pushed the aside. Eyes crossing as I followed the trajectory of the spear, instead of trying to move my body I bid my time and then *bit*. I caught the very end of the point between my teeth.

If Black ever heard of this, I thought, he was going to drill me until I died. The fae shifted his footing to simply push the spear forward – which would be very, very bad – but I spat it out and parried the sword blow from his partner. This was going to end very quickly if I didn't start moving again, so I flicked my wrist at the sword fae and forced it to duck smoothly under my thrown knife while with my now-free hand I tore out his spear, flooding power in my arm to compensate for the poor angle. Bleeding like it was going out of style, one leg hanging loosely and pretty much useless, I eyed my opponents.

"She struggles still," the sword fae noted in voice that sounded like a deer's death rattle, like an owl swooping down.

"Title of my memoirs," I gasped. "On that note: **Rise.**"

Thick chords of shadow spread across my body as my wounds closed. A little more of that bundle of power inside me faded away. Luckily I hadn't had to use much of it so far – I doubted I'd run into anything as useful to Take anytime soon. The sight of my wound disappearing in the span of heartbeat, healed perfectly, was enough to give the fae pause. The healing wasn't painless, of course, it hurt just as much as the wounding had because the Choir of Contrition was obviously a bunch of bleeding sadists. That moment of surprise cost them. I forced power into my legs and in the blink of an eye I was on the deadwood soldiers with a spear, ramming his buddy's own weapon through the small chink between his wood breastplate and the lower parts of his armour. The creature gasped in pain but I ignored it, twisting to meet the assault of the other fae. The sword was angled for my throat, which was smart of him: I'd just conclusively proved that hacking away at my limbs was useless. Nothing short of a killing blow was going to stop me. Unfortunately for him, sword blades going for me was something I was intimately familiar with. I caught his wrist, twisted it sharply and forced him to his knees. A hard stroke was enough to send his still-helmeted head tumbling to the ground. I glanced at the one with the spear through the belly, saw he was on his knees desperately trying to take it out.

"A year ago," I said, "that struggle comment would have been a great set up."

The point of my sword went through one of the eyeholes, came away wet with blood and some silvery fluid that turned into smoke. I got ready to back up Adjutant, but he'd apparently turned the situation around. He tossed the corpse of one soldier at the other and, taking the spear by the shaft two-handed, began to brutally beat down the still-living fae.

"Hakram," I muttered. "That is *not* how you use a spear."

The fae tried to retreat but I kicked it in the back, having approached quietly, and Adjutant brought down the spear – without even needing to turn it around, since he'd been holding it upside down – to pierce the creature through the throat when she was down. We caught our breaths for a moment, him still bleeding and me feeling my Name's power simmer down without an opponent to take it out on.

"I can't help but notice the blizzard hasn't gone away," Adjutant finally said, bending over to pick up his axe.

I eyed the raging winds ahead warily. Behind us my legionaries had managed to get their line in order, only to be entirely relieved of pressure moments ago when the fae started fleeing back into the blizzard. While giving Hakram and I a very wide berth. That showed a remarkable understanding of how that fight would go.

"Could be there's another one inside," I said.

"Ten denarii there's something even nastier in the middle," Adjutant said.

"That's not a bet," I said, "that's you stealing my hard-earned salary."

I sheathed my sword.

"The one who talked," I said. "He said something that troubles me."

"We are the footsoldiers of Winter," the orc quoted softly.

"If they're not lying," I said. "If those were really the rank and file..."

"How strong will an officer be?" the orc completed.

What did that even make the fae my legionaries were having trouble with? Skirmishers? *Or civilians*, I thought, and the shiver that went up my spine had nothing to do with the cold. Nothing here was adding up. I didn't know much about the fae, but



if they'd attempted to invade Creation before *someone* would have fucking written about it. I refused to believe there could be several hundred books about the godsdamned Licerian Wars, which hadn't even happened on this continent, and not a single one about 'that one time Arcadia poured out as an unstoppable flood of death'.

"There's other gates in and out of Arcadia," I said. "And they don't seem to have trouble like this. There's fae in the Waning Woods, sure, but they don't invade places as an *army*. Refuge is a day's walk away from a gate and they're still on the map."

"So why, then, is the Winter Court sending soldiers here?" Hakram asked. "Is it because this isn't a proper gate?"

A wave of warmth washed away the cold a moment before someone cleared their throat. I turned.

"I'm rather curious about that myself," Masego said. "And I know where we can find answers."

## Chapter 6: Backlash

*"One learns more from defeat than victory. Therefore, fear the general that has never won a battle."*

– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

Masego hadn't changed a bit since I last saw him. Tall, dark-skinned and boyishly chubby under his loose clothes. His spectacles were fogged by the cold. He'd put on a thick cloak and his trinket-threaded braids were covered by... I was honestly at a loss as to how to describe that abomination. Knitted colourful yarn vaguely shaped like an ugly hat trying to devour an equally awful hat?

"I'm sorry. I'm happy to see you and all but what is *that*?" I asked, pointing at the inanimate creature squatting over his head.

"My father knitted it," Apprentice replied, tone defensive. "Didn't want me to go out in the cold with my ears uncovered."

I almost asked him which father had committed that crime against anyone with eyes, but I wasn't sure whether that thing would be more disturbing if made by the Warlock or by an incubus, so I refrained from finding out. Probably the incubus, I morbidly thought. Warlock had always been impeccably dressed every time I saw him. Even the occasional casual worse-than-death threat hadn't been enough for me to stop noticing how ridiculously attractive the man was. Between him and Malicia, Evil had the whole hot and dangerous thing covered. Though Kilian was all I needed, of course, I loyally added afterwards. Certainly much

less likely to kill me, and I'd come to learn that was not a given in relationships when you were a villain.

"Catherine," Hakram said.

"I'm here," I hastily replied.

"Masego, you've got something?" the orc prompted.

"Yes," the Soninke mage said, pushing up his spectacles. "The anchor for the blizzard is further inside. I've narrowed down a location."

"You can't just break the spell from here?" I asked.

"It's not a spell. And spells cannot be broken, only dispersed," Apprentice said. "This blizzard is pouring out of Arcadia through a semi-stable gate."

"Shut the gate, shut the weather," I said. "Got it."

"Possibly," the bespectacled man said. "It depends on how strong the bleed over from Arcadia into Creation was."

"I'm not having permanent winter in the middle of my city, Masego," I said. "Broke, demon-tainted *and* covered in ice is where I draw the line."

"We take the hard stances," Hakram said gravely.

The prick. I was about to reply when I caught sight of movement ahead in the storm. Within a heartbeat my sword was back in hand and Adjutant's axe raised.

"We'll revisit that later," I said, taking the lead and moving into the blizzard.

"I'm a rebel," I heard Hakram tell Masego in a pleased voice.

"And you cheat at shatranj," Apprentice replied peevishly.

"I don't even need to, with you," the orc said.

I sighed. Did heroes have to deal with this much bickering? At least neither of them were prone to monologues, there was that. The howling winds and the snow they carried were blinding but not a problem for my little crew: a bubble of translucent blue power formed the moment we entered, courtesy of Masego. Between that and the warmth he was radiating, this was almost comfortable. Almost. No sight of the movement I'd glimpsed, which I naturally took as a bad sign. Just because I couldn't see more than a few feet ahead didn't mean the fae could not. For all I knew they were quietly surrounding us even as our boots crunched in the snow. Stealthy we were not.

"Masego," I said. "If we were surrounded, could you tell?"

"Yes," he said. "With the right instruments."

I paused.

"Do you have the right instruments?" I asked.

He blinked behind his spectacles.

"No," he said. "With the amount of fae magic flooding the area the best I can currently do is locate the direction of the gate."

"How long have we been walking?" Hakram frowned.

"I can't tell," I said. "That is probably not a good sign."

"Time dilation inside Arcadia varies wildly from place to place," Masego contributed helpfully. "In some sections a night could last a century in Creation, in others merely a few heartbeats."

"We're not *in* Arcadia, though," I said. "Right?"

Apparently howling winds did not make awkward silences any less awkward. You learned something every day. I glanced at Apprentice.

"Masego?"

"We're close to the gate," he said.

"Masego."

"Should be there soon," he said.

"Masego."

The chubby Soninke cleared his throat.

"I cannot tell," he admitted. "To my senses it *feels* like we are, but that shouldn't--"

With a quiet ping the javelin punched through the shield bubble and would have taken the mage in the throat if I hadn't snatched it out of the air by reflex. I glanced down at the weapon. Bronze, covered in runes. That were glowing. I managed to throw it away a moment before it blew up in shards of metal and ice, some of the shrapnel scoring lines on my cheeks.

"We come in peace," I blatantly lied, calling out into the storm with a sword in hand.

Hakram tried to turn his laugh into a cough.

"Catherine," Masego said, "the fae are unparalleled masters of deception. They're not going to fall for-"

The blizzard cleared ahead of us, revealing a slender silhouette. A man in a scale armour of woven dead wood and obsidian, horned helmet covering his entire face – even his eyes – save for his chin and mouth. The pale skin revealed under was pale as a corpse's. A spear in hand, he sat astride what would have been a long-legged shaggy horse if not for the long horn protruding from its forehead.

"I hate it when you do that," Apprentice muttered.

"Good evening, Lady of Marchford," the fae said.

My wariness immediately went up a notch. The lesser fairies hadn't quite managed to sound human when they'd spoken, too melodic and sing-song to be entirely mortal. The deadwood soldiers hadn't even tried, magic and images dripping from every word. This one, though? He sounded like a person. The most dangerous monsters were always the clever ones.

"That's me," I agreed. "And you are?"

"A Rider of the Host," he replied politely, inclining his head. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

I could feel the capitalized letter in that, the same way you did when someone spoke a Name. This was not headed in a pleasant direction.

"Rider, then," I said. "I don't suppose you're moving people behind us as we speak?"

"You have my word no fae will attack while under truce," he replied calmly.

That wasn't a no. I glanced at Masego, who nodded sharply. Whatever was coming at our back when negotiations inevitably broke down – and if I was being entirely honest with myself, there was no real chance they would not – he'd be the one to handle it.

"So you're in charge of the fae invading my city?" I said.

"I was given command of this host," the Rider said.

Eh, close enough. The way he'd worded that instead of giving me a yes or no probably meant he was omitting something, but the intricacies of fae politics were something I gave a remarkably low amount of fucks about. *Do not make me learn fae politics, you bastards*, I silently thought. *I can barely handle the human ones.*

"I don't suppose you'd just scamper back into Arcadia if I asked?" I said.

The Rider smiled, revealing a mouthful of milky sharp teeth.

"Are you offering a deal, Lady of Marchford?" he said.

"Gods, am I ever *not* falling for that one," I muttered. "Look, whatever you are. I could drum your sorry excuse for an invasion out of my backyard, but I'll take losses doing it. No getting around that. I've got other cats to skin, so why don't we just call it a night and both walk away?"

"That sounded like a threat," the Rider noted.

"It was," I replied frankly. "You're probably some sort of force to reckon with back in Arcadia, but this is *my* wheelhouse. I've walked away from the corpses of scarier stuff than you."

"Lady of Marchford, this *is* home," he said, smiling.

"Catherine," Masego whispered.

"I'm a little busy at the m—"

I bit down on that. Last time I'd passed on Apprentice's advice in a bad spot I'd walked right into demon fun time, swiftly followed by the screaming soul surgery interlude. Learn from your mistakes, Foundling.

"Yes?"

"Remember that question you asked me?" he said.

I nodded.

"We are," he whispered. "They took across a shard of Arcadia."

Oh, this just kept getting godsdamned better.

"Rider, did you pricks fairy-land the middle of my city?" I growled.

"The truce is over," the fae replied.

The blizzard swallowed him instantly.

"So that's a yes," I said. "Gods Below and Everburning. You bastards are starting to catch up to Heiress on my murder list."

I didn't hear them coming, because they didn't make a sound. It was the kind of instinct my Name gave me, the same that allowed me to catch an arrow in flight or roll out of a building on fire before it collapsed — both of which had happened to be

depressingly often since I became a villain. A slender wedge of mounted fae ghosted out of the howling winds, spears at the ready. Like the Rider who'd spoken to me they were astride the murderous-looking cousin of a unicorn, though their own armours lacked the obsidian that had been on the last one's. Maybe he *had* been in charge. My eyes narrowed at the sight of their hooves never leaving a mark in the snow. I wouldn't put that above them, really, but more likely... My wrist snapped up and a spear of shadow coalesced, tearing unfailing through the wind and straight through the lead rider's chest. He dissipated, the lot of them just a cold mirage.

"Cat," Hakram said, tone alarmed.

My eyes swivelled where he was pointing his axe, to our left. Another wedge of mounted fae. A trickle of Name power drifted up to my eyes, forcing them to sharpen in the poor light. They weren't leaving a trail either. Which meant... And would you look at that: another silent wedge was coming up from our back. They, one the other hand, were leaving hoof prints. The answer seemed clear, which two years of dealing with Akua Sahelian had taught me meant they were probably fucking with me. I formed another spear of shadow and swivelled to throw it to our right, the only avenue that they weren't visibly using. A heartbeat later the faint silhouette of a rider ducking under the spear, pressing against her mount, flickered into visibility for the barest moment. *There you are.*

"Brace yourself," Apprentice said.

Blinding blue light flared up, his bubble turning into a broad rectangular panel straight in their path. The rider at the tip of the wedge, still closely pressed against her mount, guided her unicorn into leaping over it. And hit another panel with a dull thump, this one entirely invisible. I snorted. That was a new trick. The two wings of cavalry split smoothly, beginning the way around before the lead fae had even hit the ground. The blue panel's glow intensified before it blew up, detonating in a flash of heat and light.

"Masego, can you tell me where the talker is?" I asked.

"Behind them," the Soninke replied without missing a beat.

"That's where I'm going, then," I said. "You boys try not to get yourself killed – I'm pretty sure I can't afford a double funeral."

I began moving before they could reply. I'd barely taken a dozen strides before the protection of whatever ward Apprentice had going on ceased, the wind almost battering me down. I'd gone through the middle, since it was the clearest path, but the riders in the back of the two columns peeled off and went

straight for me. So much for the easy way. That made one, two, three... eight in all. Joy. I was going to be feeling this in the morning, wasn't I? Stilling my breath, I stood my ground with my sword in hand. I'd been taught to deal with mounted men, though not fae. *The only dangerous part of a lance is the tip*, Black's voice reminded me. *Watch the horse. Cavalry tramples what it can't skewer*. These were spears, not lances, but the principle held. The riders were used to hunting together, I noticed. They silently adjusted their angles so they wouldn't charge into each other if I managed to avoid them.

Whatever sorcery had made them almost invisible was gone, but I was smelling a rat. So far they hadn't once used a straightforward attack, there would be more to this. Frowning, I formed a small orb of shadow and shot it at the leftmost rider – who guided his mount a little to the side to avoid it, never breaking stride. Not a fake? There was a flash of flame behind me as Masego got serious and my question answered himself: only half the riders cast a shadow in the sudden light. Gods, I was already starting to hate fighting fae. So, how did one dodge a blow they couldn't see coming? *Don't be where it hits*, if Captain was to be believed. I'd been taught that lesson one hammer swing at a time. Name power trickled into my legs and I pushed off, sending a spray of snow behind me. I kept a low profile, eyeing the spears headed for me across a loose half-circle, and shifted tracks to head *under* a unicorn before I could be turned into several bloody pieces of Foundling. My sword flashed up, opening the creature's belly as I slid under it and I winced as the ice-cold water that flooded out of the wound.

I landed in a sprawl behind the faltering beast, forcing myself to my feet and running in the direction Apprentice had told me. I could feel the riders wheeling around for another charge behind me and resisted the urge to blindly shoot a spear of shadows in their direction. My well was deeper since my Name had been restored, but there were still limits to what I could draw on. I couldn't afford to waste too much power on longshots, not with a hard fight ahead of me. Now, running away from a mounted killer with your back to them and flat fields around you was about the single worst position you could be relative to cavalry. I was not unaware of this, of course, but standing my ground back there with the other two at my side was a losing battle. Our bag of tricks was nothing to sneer at, and had only grown since the Liesse Rebellion, but there was only so long we'd hold our own against creatures that were literally defined by trickery.

No, the way to end this was ahead of me. Cut the head of the snake, other assorted and vaguely violent metaphors. The riders behind me would catch up soon enough, but I was banking on that changing nothing. The silhouette of the Rider of the Host was hard to make out, even with Name sight, but it was there. On a hill, overlooking the scrap and radiating genteel disdain. Yeah,

that one had all the little marks of nobility to it. Even in Arcadia, some things were the same. I got to the foot of the hill before the enemy caught up. Glancing at the Rider, I was considering my options while the spears got ever closer when he spoke up.

"Enough," he said. "I will deal with this. Break the others."

Ah, there it was. I did love a bit of hubris in my opponents. I'd mouthed off to the big bad fairy and gotten in front of it, of course it was going to want a piece of me. And it wouldn't want its underlings to get involved, because it was making a point. Probably not about honour, with the fae, but arrogance would do in a pinch. I wasn't picky.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said. "Last time I saw Masego get pissy he torched a demon so hard it melted the stone under it."

"We are not demons," the Rider said, raising his spear. "We are not mindless abominations. Our existence has purpose."

"You're also supposed to have brains," I said. "So I genuinely don't understand why you're making a mess here. Even if you somehow manage to beat my men, you have to realize the Empire is going to throw all you until you break."

"These matters are beyond your understanding, Lady of Marchford," he said.

"I'm going to enjoy punching that line *right* out of your mouth," I replied cheerfully, baring my teeth.

The spear lowered, the Rider charged and my Name howled in joy so loudly it drowned out the wind.

## Chapter 7: Elaboration

*"Ah, but being defeated was always part of my plan! Yet another glorious victory for the Empire."*

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful

We'd gotten the usual banter and I'm-going-to-kill-you, no-I'm-going-to-kill-you posturing out of the way, so it was now time to get to the stabbing. Admittedly my favourite part, especially when I wasn't taking on a hero. This sad sack of smugness might pack a punch, but he wasn't carrying a solemn promise of victory handed down by the Heavens. If I started chopping of limbs he wasn't going to get back up with an irritating one-liner about Evil always being defeated. As good ol' Willy had learned in the end, that wasn't always true anyway. Sometimes Evil snatched a last moment resurrection, stomped in Good's skull and went dancing with a good-looking redhead afterwards. Probably not



victory the way the Gods Below or the average Dread Emperor conceived it, but I wasn't going to be taking life lessons from people who'd thought the invisible army plan was a good idea.

The Rider didn't seem to bother with the same tricks his minions had used, devouring the slope on the way down faster than I believed was actually possible. It occurred to me that most everyone I fought had cavalry while I had to make do with a pack of malevolent goblins, which struck me as pretty unfair. Before I could further lament the fact, I had to unsheathe my sword and brace myself for impact. It would have been a mistake to think of the Rider as a mere lancer, I decided. For one, his murderous unicorn effectively had a second spear jutting out of its forehead. More than that, unlike most horseman, killing his mount was unlikely to slow him down much. The way he'd introduced himself had me guessing he was in some way linked to the state of a horseman, but I doubted taking care of that would knock him out of the fight. Creatures that introduced themselves with fancy titles usually had some power to back up that presumption. That or they died early and bad.

Eyes calm, hands steady, I watched the points of the spear and the horn come for me. The spear would be the dangerous one: it wasn't like the unicorn could twirl around the horn for a second go once it was past me. I hoped. Letting out a long breath, I adjusted my footing to be able to dash forward without missing a beat just before the Rider got in range. The horn I ducked under, the spear I narrowly avoided – it scraped my left pauldron – and I made to slide under the unicorn to open its belly. The back of the spear hit me right above the nose, knocking me down as I cursed. I rolled to the side, but not quick enough: the unicorn's hooves came down and caved in my breastplate. Strike one for my plate being anything more than expensive dead weight today, since that could easily have been my ribs. I hated breaking ribs, half the time shards got into my lungs and I ended up coughing blood.

I managed to swing at the spear point before it took my throat, knocking it aside, and rolled before the unicorn could continue dismantling my plate. That thing was being way too bloodthirsty. Sure I hadn't been a virgin for a few years, but there was no reason for it to take who I brought into my bed so personally.

"Look," I gasped, managing to get on my feet and hastily backing away from a swing. "He was a fisherman's son. They swim all the time, do you have any idea how *fit* they look?"

Murder made horse was not impressed by my protests, if the way it tried to kick me was any indication. The Rider, what little of his face could be seen expressionless, fluidly adjusted his hold and slapped down the spear at my head. Too fast for me, when I was still sidestepping his mount. It dented my helmet, which was a much more acceptable loss than my skull. I took back everything

unpleasant I'd said about my armour today. The second strike I parried, but his handhold shifted again and he *twisted* deftly hitting my sword out of my hand. All right, this was headed nowhere. If I didn't want to end up an expensively armoured corpse I was going to have to change the beat to this. Before the third strike – this one a lunge – could put me further on the back foot, I managed to get back in front of the unicorn. Predictably, it objected to this state of affairs and with a whinny took a step forward to put its horn through my throat. I was still unarmed, but I *did* have two free hands.

My gauntleted hands closed around the horn and I sharply pivoted. *Lift with your legs, Cat*, I reminded myself. Before the Rider could rearrange my presented spine at spear point, I flooded my limbs with power and *pulled*. For a single glorious moment I lifted the unicorn, swinging it forward like some kind of wildly failing mace until it reached its apex over my head. At which point the horn snapped. This had not, I mused, been one of my better plans. Below getting into a verbal fight with Heiress at the Tower, though still above letting William go at Summerholm. I hastily threw myself out of the way, seeing the Rider gracefully leap off his mount from the corner of my eye. The moment I got back on my feet I aimed my arm at the downed unicorn – which looked like it had broken a leg on the way down, good for me – and snapped my wrist. The backup knife shot like an arrow, sinking right into its eye. *Pickler, you queen among goblins. I can't believe I argued with you about a second knife being overkill.*

I stepped back and picked up my sword, adjusting my cloak around my neck.

"Let the record show I'm not above murdering a unicorn if it looks at me funny," I announced.

The Rider glanced at his dead mount indifferently.

"A worthy effort," he conceded. "If ultimately futile."

I paused for a moment, too many scathing replies on the tip of my tongue for me to be able to settle on a single one, but I ended up having to back away when he tried to run me through. I blinked in surprise: he'd been fast, on the unicorn, but this was something else. Quicker than even the deadwood soldiers had been, and they'd been in a league above me. Was that part of the fae package, then? Sorcery and tricks and swiftness. Not great on the staying power, but if they killed you before it became an endurance match that was hardly a problem. The fairies would be useless as tits on a sparrow if they ever tried to make a shield wall, but that wasn't the way they fought at all. It was like fighting an army of skirmishers, all of them mages, with a backbone of heavy hitters behind them. That was not a good match for the Fifteenth, or even the Legions of Terror in general.

Sword in hand, I circled the Rider silently. Another flicker and the point was skidding off my arm, leaving a long scar on the steel – I tried to catch the shaft with my free hand but it retreated too quickly. All right, so finesse wasn't going to get me anywhere. Closing the distance should have been my solution, but I was wary of getting that close to a creature so much faster than me, spear or no spear. I was going to have to take a hit, I realized with a grimace. I could walk it off if it didn't hit anywhere too lethal, and while his weapon was in my guts it couldn't defend. I missed the days when the initial parts of my battle strategies hadn't involved getting my stabbed instead of my opponent. Stepping forward, I kept my eye on the spear. That proved to be a mistake. The Rider took a hand off the shaft and a heartbeat later a gust of chilling wind slammed into me.

I dug in my feet, but it wasn't enough. The wind intensified and I was sent flying upwards, like I'd been smacked by a god's invisible hand. The world spun around me but I kept just enough awareness of my surroundings to notice the four javelins of dark ice forming in a loose lozenge ahead of me. About where I would be in a few moments, I assessed with strange clarity. And it was a sucker's bet that whatever made that ice darker would enable it to punch through plate. Well, couldn't have that. Fortunately, I still had a few tricks I'd learned since Liesse I'd yet to unpack. My Name flared, in the way it did whenever I formed a spear of shadows, but I went for something more... tangible. The darkness pooled together into a circular pane right in my trajectory, and I twisted so that I would hit it feet first. It was not quite as steady to the touch as solid ground, but it would do. I allowed my knees to bend when I hit the pane and effectively threw myself back down in the opposite direction.

The first ice javelin skimmed the edge of my gorget and I winced. I half-turned, still falling, and saw that two other projectiles were going wide. The last one was headed for the middle of my back, though, which was less promising. I formed an orb of shadow in my palm as it neared and shot it straight into the point at the last moment – the javelin exploded into shards when it hit, and I braced myself for my coming reacquaintance with the ground. Optimism, that. Instead I turned back to face the sight of the Rider with translucent wings sprouting off his back, just as his spear punched through the plate covering my belly. I gasped in pain, writhing around the point, and he tore it off without missing a beat. Kicking me away he fluttered back and I landed bleeding on the ground. My knees gave and I ended up in an ungainly crouch.

"Rise," I croaked.

Nothing happened, and panic welled up.

"*Rise*," I repeated.

No, it was working I realized. Just *slowly*. The wound began to close at a snail's pace, and I could feel it drawing much deeper from that bundle of power than it should have. Shit. Black had warned me, hadn't he? Borrowed power always turned on its user.

"Your lack of understanding of your own aspects is a marvel to behold," the Rider commented.

A flicker and he was in front of me, palm thrust out. I forced myself out of the way of the gust of wind, hissing at the pain of my still-closing wound.

"Thrice gifted is your Name," he said, idly circling me. "Thrice used can your stolen power be, from dusk 'til dawn."

Well, that was useful to know. Would have been even better to know it before I'd gotten myself run through twice, but beggars can't be choosers.

"Thanks for the tip," I grunted. "While we're at it, I don't suppose you'd care to tell me your nefarious plans?"

I readied myself for another rousing round of Catherine-tries-not-to-die, but the attack never came. The Rider was twitching, mouth twisting in discomfort.

"Since you are about to die anyway," he said reluctantly, through gritted teeth, "I might as well reveal the depths of your failure."

Wait, what? That never worked. Not even with Heiress and she lived for this stuff. It certainly didn't look like he *wanted* to tell me any of this.

"This struggle is but a distraction," the Rider said. "You are meant to waste time and die here while the true war is fought in Creation."

Masego had told me once that Arcadia worked according to different rules than Creation. I'd only been pretending to listen when he'd been talking about how that affected the creational laws governing the flow of time – which was, apparently, a classical element. I *really* needed to learn what those were at some point – but one part had actually been interesting enough I'd tuned back in. Arcadia was, in a lot of ways, rawer than Creation proper. In Creation stories bound only the Named, but in Arcadia everything was a story. It was why everything was so changeable. I was standing in front of an enemy clearly winning against me, at his mercy, and had just prompted him to gloat and reveal his plans. So he *had*. Even if he didn't want to.

"Alas, I am in despair," I badly lied. "Tears, woe is me. Why would you do something so wicked?"

The Rider cursed in a tongue I could barely process as spoken.

"If Summer is at war, so must be Winter," he said. "The boundaries have been thinned, the host will be assembled."

I squinted at him.

"You're insane," I said slowly. "You'll... never get away with this?"

The fae looked at me, then at the dead unicorn. There was a long moment of silence. Then he bolted. Just... legged it, as fast as his little fairy feet could manage. I frowned, then raised an arm. I formed a spear of shadows and shot him in the back. The Rider cursed again, though he managed to avoid most of the damage – all I did was clip his shoulder. That might be more of a problem than I'd thought, though: one of his wings burst into existence, then out. Huh. Was this what being a hero felt like? No wonder they were always so overconfident. I caught up within moments. For all that some intangible tide had turned in my favour, he hadn't gotten any slower. The spear wove elegantly around my sword, but instead of letting him drive me back I forced my way close. His palm shot off, but I was in no mood for a repeat of the flight adventure. I punched his hand, which while not the most elegant of solutions still broke a few fingers with a hard crack. The Rider turned his wounded shoulder to me, and the wing formed a moment later.

I was blown back like I'd been hit by a blast of pure unformed magic – my occasional spars with Masego had taught exactly what that felt like, in unpleasant detail – but pivoted on myself and used the momentum to take a swing. I hacked into his elbow, tearing through the wood and obsidian scales, before having to raise my arm to block a swing of the shaft. I almost made a comment about how the tides had turned, but bit down on my tongue at the last moment. Gloating was for amateurs, and here in Arcadia might have very final consequences. My gauntlet was half-crumpled but that didn't hurt any less when I swung again, decking him in the face. He flinched back and my sword came down again. Cleaved straight through the elbow this time, the limb flopping to the ground. The lack of blood was a little off-putting, but I didn't break my stride.

My leg swept his as I rammed my pommel into his chest, but I realized a moment too late that wouldn't work on this kind of an opponent. His good wing burst into existence, getting back on his feet, and he slammed the bottom of his spear into my chest. Gods, I was basically wearing scrap metal at this point. Even knowing how that had ended up for the Exiled Prince I was tempted to get an enchanted suit of armour. Might not get my ass killed if I used it only the once. I smacked at his hands with my pommel and he dropped the spear. Within a heartbeat a sword of frost had formed in his hand but an orb of shadows had formed in mine: I

rammed it through the spell, dissipating it before it could form properly. I heard a grunt and in a spray of crystal-clear water a forearm emerged from the stump to replace the one I'd cut off. Well, there went attrition tactics. I went for a killing stroke instead, side of my sword smashing into the side of his neck.

There was a spray of scales and he fell: I stepped back to adjust my stance for a deeper blow. Both wings flickered into existence, and before I could hit him agains he shot off into the sky. Well, shit. It figured that if he could grow an arm back he could fix whatever I'd done to the shoulder. I was debating how feasible it would be to make a series of shadow platforms to pursue – not very, it ate through my reserves like you wouldn't believe – when a rope of green smoke slithered its way through the air until it coiled around his foot. The Rider hacked at it with another ice sword but it just went through, cleaving through his boots and doing nothing to the smoke. Which was pulled a moment later, smashing him into the ground like a falling star. Hakram idly walked up to him, burying his axe into the skull repeatedly and with great enthusiasm. I turned to eye Masego, who dismissed the green smoke rope with an idle gesture.

"Catherine," he greeted me calmly. "I see you're still alive."

"Arguably my best skill," I replied.

The dark-skinned mage blinked.

"Catherine you *died*. Not even a year ago," he said.

I might have insulted myself by accident there, I reflected. I cleared my throat.

"Your guys are taken care of?" I asked.

"Most," Hakram replied, wiping sweat off his brow as he joined us. "Some fled."

*Kill-stealer*, I mouthed at him. He grinned back unrepentantly.

"I meant to take a prisoner for interrogation, but they were not inclined to cooperate," Apprentice said.

I glanced at the corpse of the Rider. With all three of us we might have managed to capture him, but given how dangerous he'd been that would have been risky. Probably for the best he'd gotten the orc treatment.

"I learned a few things from this one," I said. "This whole fight was bait. They want us to wander around Arcadia while they mass for an assault on Marchford."

"I suspected as much," Masego shrugged. "We're no longer in the shard."

I frowned.

"How d'you figure that?" I asked.

"We're not surrounded by blizzard, for one," he said. "And I cannot feel the boundaries of the shard anymore. We're in Arcadia Resplendent, that much is certain."

I sheathed my sword, trying to hide my surprise. He was right, about the blizzard. It was still windy out but visibility was clear. I hadn't even noticed. When it had gotten easier to move I'd been paying attention to the fight, and must have unconsciously chalked it up to my Name taking care of the problem.

"He said something else that caught my attention," I said. "Something about Winter having to be at war when Summer is."

Hakram looked vaguely pained and I felt with him. The idea of there being a whole other breed of these guys out for our blood wasn't exactly thrilling. Masego looked pleased, naturally, because he wasn't going to have to rebuild a city that was broke, demon-corrupted, iced in *and* on fire. I did not care for the way that list kept getting longer.

"That explains a great deal. The Courts of Arcadia are named after the seasons, but they have nothing to do with those same seasons on Creation," Apprentice said. "Consider them more like states of mind. When Winter and Summer become the two existing courts, it means Arcadia is at its most contrary."

"If they're pissed at each other," I said, "why is Winter making itself my problem?"

"Symmetry, Catherine," the bespectacled man enthused. "If Summer is at war with an enemy exterior to Arcadia, Winter must be the same. I would say there is no personal enmity behind this invasion, not that fae can truly be personal about anything. The weaker boundary at Marchford simply made it the obvious target."

"Stop sounding so cheery about creatures trying to murder us," I requested, then shifted uneasily.

Back in Laure, the Ruling Council's session had been delayed to talk about an incident in Dormer: a handful of Summer fairies making a mess down there, though not a large one. The picture that was putting together was not one I liked at all.

"How likely is it that the courts could be targeting the same enemy?" I asked.

Masego blinked.

"Impossible," he said.

Oh, good. That made the mess even more complicated but I'd take it.

"Though, of course, from the fae perspective no nation as we know them would be considered the 'same enemy'," he added absent-mindedly. "Making the distinction largely academic."

*Don't punch him, I told myself. You still need him to get out of this place.*

"Should have led with that, warlock's get," Hakram said, tone amused.

"Oh," Masego said.

He glanced at me reproachfully.

"It was a very poorly-phrased question," he said.

"Quit while you're ahead," I advised. "All right. Fine. So Winter's going to keep attacking as long as Summer does, and we have no idea *why* it's attacking or even who specifically."

"If I was trying to keep you busy and had an understanding of the fae mindset," Hakram said. "I would provoke a war with Summer, knowing Winter would be forced to mirror the action. Likely at Marchford."

I sighed.

"Heiress," I said.

That did sound right up her alley. As Governess of Liesse, even if Summer was at war with her city specifically, I'd still be forced to protect her from the consequences of her actions. It was my duty as a member of the Ruling Council, and her city was full of Callowans to boot. Meanwhile I'd have to deal with an assault on my demesne from an entirely different court, eroding the strength of the Fifteenth while simultaneously forcing me to use other means to deal with Summer. It was the kind of overly complicated plot with massive potential for backfiring that was her bread and butter. Hells, she might as well have signed the whole thing. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Winter's got a boss fairy, right?" I said to Masego.

"There will be a king or a queen, yes," he agreed.

"If I punch it until it dies, that feels like a problem solved," I grunted. "If Winter stops attacking then Summer would have to as well, no?"

The chubby mage frowned.



"I'm not sure," he admitted. "Possibly. Regardless, Catherine, if you attempt to fight the ruler of a court you will get killed. Those creatures qualify as a god by most measures."

"Dying's never stopped me before," I said.

"We lack angels to loot for a resurrection, this time," Hakram said. "Cat, there's no need to go at this alone. This is bigger than us. The Tower needs to step in."

*If Malicia gets involved I'm tacitly admitting the Ruling Council can't run Callow without her help,* I thought. I bit my lip. I'd need to think on this more.

"First we get out of here," I finally said. "Masego, you said we're no longer in the shard. Does that mean we can't leave the same way we came in?"

"We'll need a gate to step through or a fairly powerful fae to open a path," he said.

"Do your thing, then," I said. "Where's the closest gate?"

"Explain the fae to me, Apprentice," he muttered. "Find me a gate, Apprentice. I could be taking apart a pocket dimension right now, you know. *They* never ask for anything."

He just beginning to trace runes in the air when Hakram cleared his throat. I looked at him, then the direction he was pointing at. There were snow-covered hills as far as the eye could see, with the occasional thicket of dead trees and a few distant mountains. There was also a path now, paved in ice. It snaked across the hills towards what looked like a glistening city.

"That wasn't there a moment ago," I said.

"We weren't looking for a gate a moment ago," Apprentice said.

"Gods, I *hate* this place," I cursed.

I eyed the road, which began atop the hill just beyond us and looked as pristine as if it had just been built. For all I knew it had been.

"We're not using that," I said. "That is an *insultingly* obvious trap."

Hakram clapped my shoulder, amused.

"It would be an easier walk than the snow," Masego said, just shy of complaining.

"You could use the exercise," Adjutant said, nudging him.

I blinked. If Hakram was next to him, then who had – I went for my sword, and someone laughed.

"You lot are *terrible* at not getting killed," Archer told me cheerfully, hand still on my shoulder.

## **Villainous Interlude: Chiaroscuro**

*"It is a shallow soul who fights to the cry of 'might makes right'. The truth is more concise: might makes."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

When young mages were taught the limits of sorcery, one of the first principle they were introduced to was that of Keter's Due.

The largest sorcerous event ever to take place on Calernia was the creation of the Kingdom of the Dead by the king known to history as Trismegistus: a single man had, within the span of ten hours, cursed to undeath the entire population of an area comparable in size to the Wasteland. Though of course details were sparse, given that this had transpired before most of the continent was literate, through the higher order of mathematics introduced by the Miezens it was possible to piece together the broad lines of what had unfolded. Though High Arcana essentially bypassed the need for direct conversion and sympathetic links that limited lower sorceries, even those mysteries could ultimately be understood through numbers. A recent understanding, that. Early magic had been limited by capacity to channel power of individuals, the mental and physical exhaustion they could take before the continued manipulation of the laws of Creation burned them out.

The Taghreb had attempted to go beyond those limits by breeding with supernatural creatures more apt at using sorcery, most notably the djin. Limited success was attained: to this day, mages born to the southerners were on average more powerful than those born in the rest of the Empire. The Soninke solution had been less... carnal, and ultimately more successful: behind the walls of Wolof, the first ritual magic of Praes had been born. Those early rituals were brusque and inexact, relying heavily on human sacrifice to make up for deficiencies in what was not yet known as spell formulas. It was still a massive improvement over individual forms of sorcery, though this superiority was ultimately the reason further progress stalled: already having an edge in spellcasting, the ancient Soninke kingdoms sought to lessen weaknesses instead of improving a strength. A mistake that cost them in the War of Chains.

As in most things magical, the Miezan occupation changed everything. The foreigners from across the Tyrian Sea brought across with them Miezan numerals and the Petronian theory of magic. Though in many ways inferior to the Trismegistan theory

later adopted by the Empire under Dread Emperor Sorcerous, the Petronian theory turned the ramshackle artistic ritual efforts of the Soninke mages into a proper method. The energies released by human sacrifice or other means of fuel began to be quantified and measured, matched to the requirements in scale and effect of what the mages set out to achieve. Which ultimately led to the discovery one of the great limits of sorcery: in the span between the release of energy and its conversion into a spell effect, whether it be ritual or individual, some of that energy was lost. Worse, that quantity of energy was not fixed but proportional to the total sum of energy released.

What was actually wasted varied from a tenth to fourth when it came to individual casting, but could go up to seven parts out of ten when it came to rituals. Though advances in spellcrafting and the theft of the entirely different Baalite spell formulas inherited by Ashur managed to lower that proportion, no spellcaster had ever managed to get the waste under a tenth in any form of sorcery. That tenth was colloquially known Keter's Due. To turn an entire kingdom into undead, the Dead King in his capital of Keter was forced to open a stable and permanent portal into one of the Hells. And while nine tenths of that energy was properly channelled in ritual, the remaining portion turned the city of Keter into a warped ruin of anomalous magical phenomenon. The problem of Keter's Due was that it limited what could be accomplished by ritual magic if you were in any way invested in where it took place. The larger and more powerful the ritual, the more dangerous the waste of power released.

Akua's intentions were of titanic scale, which meant this was a titanic problem.

Turning Liesse into a ritual array had been achievable, especially after the widespread sabotage of all major infrastructure that had followed her taking stewardship of the city. Who exactly was responsible for that, she was still unsure. It had been too subtly wrought to be Foundling's doing, and too moderate a retaliation to be the Lord Black's. That left the Empress, but there was no way the woman would have allowed her control of the city if she actually knew what Akua intended. Her best guess was that she had not been the target at all, which was somewhat amusing if an irritation. Even with that interlude, Akua had been satisfied with the gain she'd made in the rebellion. Liesse's wall ran with old and powerful wards, and the city had been built by the corpse of an angel. Tying both those assets into her own project had been a highly stimulating magical puzzle, one she'd been working on since the age of thirteen. And she had done it.

Akua was genuinely regretful that there was no one should could trust enough to boast of the achievement. It might be the single greatest accomplishment of her life. It was, though, somewhat of

a comfort that eventually every living soul in Calernia would tremble at the mention of it. Powering the array had been the first issue, and one she'd come very close to solving at the Battle of Liesse: imprisoning a Hashmallim would have given her everything she needed and more. Unfortunately, Foundling had turned the Lone Swordsman's blunder to her own purposes. Akua was not a debutante trying to pull off her first poisoning, so of course she'd had alternatives prepared. Fuelling anything of this size with demons was asking for trouble, considering the Due, so she'd had to look into gods. Securing the entity that dwelled in the heart of the Greywood had proved unfeasible, but her second target had panned out. Mostly.

The seventeen conduits she'd had her agents acquire – to the cost of many, many lives – were kept under enchanted sleep in chambers below the Ducal Palace. The seeking rituals she'd done had revealed that the entity they were bound to was artificial, not a natural force, but that made no real difference. According to her calculations it was even more powerful than the Hashmallim had been, which was a boon as well as a curse. When a stable binding was established and she triggered the array, Keter's Due would effectively wipe Liesse and its immediate surroundings off the map. That was not an acceptable result, since she would be on the premises and fully intended on staying human. That was arguably the brilliant part of what she'd achieved with her array. She had found a way to still use the waste energy, what could be construed as a pre-conversion escapement that effectively negated the downsides of such a large ritual. Given the scale of the entity she'd found, however, she'd had to revise her schematics and broaden the size of the array's escapement.

That meant more stone needed, more time and an ever-growing list of liabilities.

Secrecy was paramount: the moment the Named of the Empire became aware of what she was making they would immediately move to destroy her. Though she'd prepared Liesse for assault, Akua was not ready to face the full might of the Legions of Terror. Her infiltration and co-option of both the Scribe's and the Empress' spy networks in Liesse was a temporary state of affairs. The longer she had to falsify the information coming out of the city, the higher the chances her agents would be caught and purged. Already Malicia had flushed out the first level of her infiltration, and even if she was abroad Scribe would catch up eventually. The Webweaver was a tool, not a player, but she was a very effective tool. There were, of course, more pressing threats. The worst of which had been unleashed by Foundling, who seemed to have a bottomless bag of talented lunatics to throw at Akua's plans.

The heiress to Wolof was about due another of her backers coming to a grisly end, so her mood was already cautious when she

allowed Fasili into her solar. There was no point in shuffling the parchments on her desk – she knew better than to keep anything compromising where there weren't two dozen highly lethal wards forbidding entry to anyone but her. There were only seven safekeeping this room, a mere warning by Praesi standards. The Soninke bowed after entering, lower than he should to anyone not the Empress. Fasili was a fair hand at flattery, a skill helped along by the stunning good looks bred into all highborn Praesi.

"Lady Akua," he greeted her. "Gods turn a blind eye to your schemes."

"Lord Fasili," she replied, affecting warmth.

She didn't particularly care for him, though he was useful. Having the heir to the High Lordship of Aksum on her side opened doors and brought resources, even if he was semi-openly feuding with the woman who actually ruled that region. If she'd not been Named he would have been sizing her up for a dagger in the back to afterwards usurp control of her own faction, but as it was she was untouchable. That didn't make him trustworthy in the slightest, but it did mean he was not a rival. He was a danger mostly to her other supporters, squabbling for the position as her right hand. For now, there was no need to deny him the perception that he was.

"I bring unfortunate tidings," the man spoke in Mtethwa. "Another patrol has been destroyed."

*Surprising*, the Named thought. After Foundling's goblin had begun killing off her patrols she'd ceased using Praesi and had instead conscripted Callowans, knowing Squire would be reluctant to kill her countrymen. Maybe enough to recall her tool to Marchford, if he killed a few.

"She has gained in ruthlessness," Akua said.

There was an undertone of approval to her voice. She'd learned the hard way not to underestimate the other woman, and seeing Squire adopt the more enlightened attitudes of the Praesi did not entirely displease her. It did not benefit her, of course, but Akua having strong enemies meant that Evil itself was strong. A skilled enemy was often more useful than an inept ally.

"Though you are no doubt correct," Fasili said, "in this instance the deaths lack the marks of the *other's* agents."

Akua's lips quirked the slightest bit at the word the man had used. Other. *Nyengana*, in Lower Miezana. The connotations did not carry across the languages. It meant *not us, therefore inferior*. Not other tongue on Calernia offered such a broad selection of terms to convey contempt as that of her people. The amusement was, however, fleeting.

"But it does bear marks," she prompted.

"A survivor was left," Fasili said. "He claims their patrol fell prey to a hunting party of fae from the Summer court."

Akua's face remained the picture of serenity.

"Not unexpected," she smoothly lied. "Though ahead of my predictions."

The *fae*? What in the name of the Dark Gods were they doing so far out of the Waning Woods? She'd been aware that Foundling was having trouble with the Winter court since the very first incident – the bastard Taghreb with the odious name Squire had running her spy network, though a talented amateur, was still an amateur – but she'd chalked that up to unforeseen side effects of using a demon of Corruption. Even Triumphant, may she never return, had only used those sparingly. Within a decade the thinning of borders would have fixed itself without any need for intervention, and if it kept Squire busy until then all the better. This, though? This was not a coincidence. If both courts were making a move on... Well, what they were attacking was the crux of the issue here, wasn't it? It was unlikely to be the Empire, which left the unfortunate possibility it could be Callow itself. That could be problematic, given that almost the entire extent of her resources was tied up in the former kingdom.

The heiress to Wolof delicately grasped her decanter of Praesi wine and poured herself a cup, then one for Fasili as well. The other Soninke bowed his head in appreciation and took a seat when she wordlessly invited him to. He discreetly passed his palm over the cup before taking it in hand, skilled enough that the alchemical pellet of lesser antidotes made no sound when it sunk into the wine. For all that High Lady Abreha seemed to think little of her heir, Akua had found him to be everything a noble of Praes should be: ruthless, patient and subtle. He'd already arranged the disgrace of two possible rivals for his position since he'd returned to her court, in both cases through a dizzying series of catspaws and intermediaries. If she'd not had two devils discreetly tailing his every move, she might even have missed some of the intricacies of his plots. As it was, Fasili was in the palm of her hand. She knew who he was sleeping with, who his enemies were and where his coin was kept. It would be the work of a slow afternoon to destroy him, if the mood ever struck her.

She wouldn't, of course. The other Soninke was a talented commander of men – though not as talented as Ghassan had been, before Foundling had ripped out his soul – and his schemes occupied enough of the players in her court that they had no occasion to dig too deep into her own activities. He'd made one attempt to investigate that himself, but the man he'd bribed to transcribe her architectural plans had been made to disappear the

same day, along with the entire chain of intermediaries used. The message had been duly received and no further attempt ever made. Akua did like to deal with intelligent men: she never had to repeat herself. Sipping at her wine – her own pellet had already been at the bottom of the cup when she'd poured – the Soninke allowed herself to enjoy the taste of home. This particular one was from the outskirts of Nok, the grapes grown there tinkered with over centuries so they would pair well with the taste of antidote.

It was something of a faux pas among the nobility to serve wine where one could taste one's precautions.

"We'll narrow our patrol routes and double the numbers deployed with each," Akua said.

Fasili inclined his head, allowing the faint trace of a smile to touch his full lips. He *would* be amused, Akua thought. Like most war-inclined aristocrats in the Wasteland, the man knew the deployment doctrines of the Legions of Terror inside out even if he'd never stepped foot inside the War College. This particular measure was straight out of the treatises penned by Marshal Grem One-Eye, as they both knew. Most Wastelanders never bothered to read those, preferring to settle for what had been written by the Black Knight who, even if Duni, was still Praesi. Neither Akua nor Fasili, however, had been inclined to pass on the insights of the greatest military mind of their age simply because it had been born inside a greenskin body. Though Malicia's dismissal of everything the Empire stood for was a mistake, it would be just as much of a mistake not to learn from the successes she had gained from a degree of practicality. Talent must be used wherever it was found. That much the Dread Empress had divined correctly.

"I've been given to understand that the Moderates are gaining ground," Fasili said, tone casual. "Rumours imply that High Lady Amina might formally withdraw from the Truebloods."

Which would mean Foramen and the Imperial Forges were not longer aligned with Akua's mother, cutting off another means of influence for the Truebloods. High Lady Amina was owed half a tenth of any profits made by the Imperial Forges, making her one of the single wealthiest individuals in Praes. Losing those coffers – as well as the knowledge of the quantity and location of any armament made in the forges filling them – would be a major blow. The Named sipped calmly at her wine, then arched an eyebrow.

"Inconsequential," she finally said.

Fasili managed to hide his surprise well enough that the only detail to betray it was the slight widening of his eyes. Akua watched the gears grind behind that handsome face, almost amused.

If she was not bothered by the Truebloods falling apart, it meant that she was no longer dependant on them for backing. The implication there being she'd either struck deals with individual members of the faction that made their affiliation irrelevant – which she had – or that she intended to strike out on her own. Which she did, in a manner of speaking. She would not turn away the allies Foundling's reckless accumulation of troops was gaining her, but the days where her efforts had been an extension of her mother's designs were coming to an end. It would be strange, to stand without the protection the woman had afforded her all these years even if she hated her. Strange and exhilarating. The cage was finally breaking.

"Do you ever get tired, Lord Fasili?" Akua asked suddenly.

The man blinked.

"Of?"

"This," she said, tone whimsical. "Of what we are. Of what we do."

There was wariness in those eyes now. He was wondering if she was trying to entrap him in some way, to make him misstep so that she could bind him closer to her will. Akua could have told herself she didn't know why she was speaking with this man, someone she could use but not trust, but that would have been lying to herself. *Because Barika is dead.* The pang of loss there surprised her, as it always did. Praesi did not have friends and confidantes, she'd always been told. They were too obvious a target, too large a liability. And yet on most days she still turned to her left to share a thought, only after realizing that the girl she would speak to was long dead. Barika was not the costliest loss she'd incurred at Liesse, but it was the one she felt the most often.

"Never," Fasili replied. "My line is that of kings and Empresses. It would be a disgrace to reach for lesser prizes."

In most cultures, Akua mused, one of her closest allies admitting to wanting a throne he believed she herself coveted would have been cause for a rift. For Praesi, though, it was duly expected. Ambition was bred into them before they were even born. Each High Lord and Lady saw to it their inheritors were more beautiful, more intelligent, more powerful than their predecessors. Some families had eschewed the Gift in their ruling line, for necromancy and diabolism often complicated the succession, but those that hadn't always brought in the most powerful mage they could secure. Praesi aristocrats were expected to always look *forward*. If they could not claim the Tower or a Name, they were to strengthen the family and prepare the grounds for their successors to surpass them. For any trueborn Praesi to not attempt to reach the heights their ancestors had touched, to



never try to go even further, was... blasphemy. Turning your back on everything that had come before you, all that set you apart from those beneath you.

Fasili Mireembe has assessed he could not currently claim the Tower or become an independent force through a Name, so he had aligned himself with Akua. Through this he sought to better his position, gain material advantages and favours that would allow him to either further the interests of Aksum or his own. Most likely he intended on being her Chancellor, if she became Dread Empress, and bide his time until he could knife her and become the Emperor himself. None of this offended her. Ambitions like these were what kept her people sharp, what set apart Praesi from the rest of Calernia. Akua's people never settled for what they had been born with, never allowed themselves to stagnate. The Dread Empire had gone through hundreds of different faces and iterations before it had conquered Callow, but in the end it *had*. Because the Kingdom of Callow had been the same since its foundation, while Praes shifted with every Tyrant. And now Dread Empress Malicia wanted to kill the very soul of their nation.

Borders set in stone, never to advance again. The wonders of sorcery that were the envy of the continent, suppressed or abandoned. The High Lords, the very whip that drove Praes to improve, neutered into irrelevance in a fate more insulting than mere extermination. Centuries of toil to make the orcs a warrior caste incapable of functioning without the Tower thrown to the wayside by granting them authority. The goblins, who would always answer to their Matrons above anyone else, allowed to sink their claws in the Legions of Terror. Oh, Akua knew what was being done. Malicia and her Knight were making Praes a nation where the power was in the hands of institutions, not Named. An Empire that was no longer malleable for every Tyrant to make into whatever tool they needed to overcome the forces of Good. A fixed monolith, bound together by a philosophy that was nore more than the absence of philosophy. A nation that did not stand for anything but standing.

"Do you know why the Truebloods are losing, Fasili?" she asked.

"My great-aunt has splintered the opposition," he replied immediately. "Without a united front, Malicia cannot be overcome."

Akua smiled, the open display of emotion making him uncomfortable.

"They were never going to win," she said. "After the civil war, when she set aside Black's cold hate and refrained from a war of extermination against the nobility, we came to believe the Empress was one of us. That she played the Great Game."

"Iron sharpens iron," the other Soninke murmured.

*And the sharpest iron takes the throne*, she finished silently. Praes would always be strong, for only the strongest could claim the Tower. Every child that mattered was taught this from the cradle.

"But she doesn't, Fasili," Akua said. "This whole time we've been trying to win the same way we did with the Maleficents of the Terribilises of olden days. Acknowledging she has touched greatness but knowing that to grow again the Empire needs a fresh Tyrant. One still hungry."

"The Empress has achieved more than almost any before her," Fasili conceded reluctantly. "It is then her due to keep power longer than almost any before her. This changes nothing. In time she will lose her way and be overthrown."

"She won't be," Akua said. "Because while we schemed for advancement, to be her successors, she has waged a war of destruction on us. And a few months ago, she won."

The dark-skinned woman brushed her hair back, though it was perfectly styled.

"She barred the office of Chancellor, the most important ward against reigns that linger," Akua began to enumerate. "She opened the highest ranks of the Legions and the bureaucracy to lowborn and greenskins, smothering our influence there. With Callowan grain she has made field rituals irrelevant, severing the bond that kept the lesser nobility dependant on us. Trade with Callow has established sources of wealth we do not control, ending our ability to win through coin. All we have left is the court, where we claw at each other for ever-lessening gains and she smiles down at the corpses."

Fasili had gone very, very quiet. He eyed her with barely-veiled horror.

"She's not trying to win the Game," she said. "That wouldn't matter. No one can win forever. She'd trying to *end* the Game."

"Then we must rebel," he said. "Now, while we still can. If you bring this to the attention of the High Lords, they will back you. To do otherwise would be folly."

Akua drank daintily from her cup.

"They already know, Fasili," she said. "The hard truth of it is that if we wage war, we will lose. We cannot beat the Legions, and the Legions are loyal. Lord Black will not turn on his mistress and the Warlock bound the soul of the last envoy to a chamber pot. The Truebloods attempted to win through guile, and they have failed. My mother clings to her crumbling plans and

grows desperate, while the weak-willed among them seek to surrender."

She met his eyes calmly.

"For that is what the Moderates are: a surrender. Do not think otherwise for a moment," Akua said. "In exchange for survival and scraps of influence, they turn themselves into coffers and spell repositories for Malicia to plunder as she wills."

"I will not allow my blood, a line that goes back to the *War of Chains*, to be used as a fucking *court ornament*," Fasili barked, eyes burning. "Evil does not surrender. Evil does not bow to inevitability. We spit in the eye of the Heavens and steal our triumphs."

Akua allowed the unsightly display of emotion to pass without comment. It was not unwarranted, when one learned one's entire way of life was teetering on the edge of destruction.

"I never believed in the Trueblood cause," Akua admitted idly. "At the heart of their movement there was a sliver of hypocrisy. They believed their ways are superior, and therefore they should lead Praes. But if their ways were truly superior, would they not already be ruling?"

"*Their* ways," Fasili repeated, eyes narrowed. "You speak as if they are not yours as well."

"You've read the treatises of Grem One-Eye," she replied. "So have I. Would your parents have? I know my mother did not, and many consider her mind as sharp as the Empress'."

"There is a difference between reading the words of the foremost general in the Empire and discarding everything we are," the other Soninke flatly retorted.

"The duty of our predecessors was to make us more than they were," Akua said. "They have succeeded in this: that is why we see a brilliant tactician instead of mouthy greenskin brute. For ages we've sought to forge better bodies, better sorceries, better minds – and yet we fight the same ways we've done since Maleficent first took a dagger in the back. We improve capacity without ever addressing *perspective*."

"If that were true," Fasili replied, "we would not be having this conversation."

"We're not having this conversation because of our families," the dark-skinned woman said. "The Empress is the one who forced our eyes open."

"The Empress would see us eradicated," the heir to Aksum hissed. "And she is *succeeding*."

"And for that," Akua replied quietly, "We owe her much. Fasili, when was the last time that we were truly in danger? Not of losing the throne to another of the great families or of failing another invasion. When was the last time the High Lords and Ladies faced *extinction*?"

The man bit his tongue, then actually thought.

"The Second Crusade," he said. "When the first revolt against the crusader kingdoms failed."

"And from those ruins rose Dread Emperor Terribilis II," Akua said. "One of our greatest, and a Soninke highborn. He did things differently from his predecessors and turned back two Crusades."

"And so we should surrender to our superior on the throne?" Fasili said bitterly.

"You miss my point," she said. "We flirted with destruction and we became *better*. Seven hundred years have passed since then, Fasili, without ever being in such a situation. We've become soft since then, narrow-minded. Arrogant."

She smiled thinly.

"And so the Hellgods put us through the crucible again," she said. "*Adapt or perish*. Are we relics to be discarded, or the beating heart of what it means to be Praesi?"

"We're not done," he said. "We're never done."

"My mother," Akua said, "would have me be the swan song of Praesi villainy. The last stand, raging against the dying of the night. But our parents succeeded, Fasili. They made us better than them. We can *learn*."

"Take what made them successful," the man said slowly. "Make it ours."

"Praes is a story," she said. "A Tyrant to lead us. A Black Knight to break heroes. A Warlock to craft wonders. A Chancellor to rule behind them. And an Empire like clay, to shape into the tool they need: an entire nation built to empower the ambitions of a single villain."

"Our Empress rules," he murmured. "Our Black Knight leads. Our Warlock crafts nothing and our Chancellor *is* nothing. All the while the Empire calcifies into institutions, impossible to move."

Yes. Finally, he was beginning to understand. None of them were acting as they should, not in the way that mattered. Malicia was more Chancellor than Empress, Lord Black had reigned as king in all but name for twenty years and the Warlock learned without ever building. They were trying to change the story but oh, they had not thought that entirely through had they? Because once the changes began, they were no longer in control. Anyone with the right power could shape the story too. Akua looked at them, and she did not see rulers. She saw stewards. They had made themselves to be administrators, and in Praes those ever only had one function: to enable the designs of the villain above them.

"Foundling came closest to understanding," Akua said. "It's how she beat me, at Liesse. It wasn't her Name she used."

Akua drained the last of her cup, gently put it down on the desk.

"It's never been about the Names, you see," the Diabolist smiled. "It's always about the *Roles*."

## Heroic Interlude: Appellant

*"One hundred and twelve: always be kind to any monster held in a cage by your nemesis. When it inevitably gets loose, it will remember the kindness and attempt to destroy the villain instead."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

A series of explosions rocked the machine and the enormous drill ceased spinning.

Though the Lowest Plaza still had a massive gaping hole in its centre, Helikean soldiers were no longer pouring out of the tunnel: when the Tyrant had fled, swearing 'eternal and unholy revenge', they'd begun retreating in good order. Hanno let out a sigh of relief. He'd not needed to tap into any of his aspects to turn back the breach, but after unleashing his Name so many times he was starting to tire. Ash was already making her way through the Delosi soldiers, curing anything short of death with a touch and that semi-permanent frown. The Ashen Priestess was admittedly one of the more combative healing Names: it should perhaps be expected that her bedside manner was rougher than that of the average priest. The White Knight wasn't exactly displeased. His memories told him that the all-loving types often had difficulty dealing with the realities of war, especially those sworn to Compassion. Their inability to reconcile the way Creation was and the way it should be could lead to some very ugly breakdowns.

The Champion was currently collecting "trophies", hacking off the tip of swords so she could make rings out of them to add to her necklace. There were already enough of those that the thing could be considered an additional layer of mail around her neck. A

somewhat grisly ritual by heroic standards, but that was always the way with Levantines. The heroes that had founded their nation had been rebels fighting the Proceran occupation, after all, and they'd been much more willing to bloody their hands than the average Named on the side of Good. Hanno sheathed his sword and took off his helmet to wipe his brow. Hedge crawled out of the wreckage of the machine moments later, covered in soot from head to toe. She'd gone in there to blow the runic array powering the drill while he held the line, and one again gotten off essentially untouched. Hanno wasn't surprised: there was a reason he kept sending her on the riskiest ventures.

As long as the Hedge Wizard and the Champion kept bickering 'amusingly', they were essentially untouchable. Their heroic band would be much too grim if they died, too dark for the amount of absurdity the Tyrant kept injecting into this siege. The White Knight eyed the giant drilling machine belching smoke and sighed again. Well, the flying towers had been a wash so he supposed it made sense for the Tyrant to try underground afterwards. Usually even villains hesitated before trying that route, since there was always the risk of running into a dwarven tunnel, but this particular monster was a reckless one. Almost too reckless, he'd begun thinking of late. Every assault that had been made on Delos so far did have a decent chance of succeeding, but they were also all half-baked enterprises. It was like victory and defeat didn't particularly matter to the man planning the operations, which was somewhat worrying. If taking Delos wasn't the way the Tyrant got what he wanted, *what* was?

Delosi officers began arranging crews to drag away the broken machine and cordoning off the hole in the ground until it could be properly filled. The Secretariat's armed forces were not particularly strong, in his opinion, but they were well-organized and had superb morale. Delosi believed that the decrees of their Secretariat were the will of the Heavens, so whenever they were deployed they would not break regardless of casualty rates. It had not been unusual for half a battalion to be wiped out on their first deployment, in the first skirmishes of the war, and yet the same men and women who'd been through that grinder did not hesitate going back to it the following day. He could respect that, the act of putting your faith in something larger than yourself. In this case it was somewhat misplaced, of course. The Secretariat was an institution made my men, and so held the flaws of those men. To find infallible judgement, one had to look higher. Hedge made her way to him, patting away the soot with a lack of method that spread the unsightliness more than got rid of it.

"That should be it for a fortnight, at least," she said. "Unless he thinks up another machine."

"He's tried above and below," Hanno noted. "We should expect a dimensional shortcut next."

The Hedge Wizard snorted, her mismatched eyes shining with anticipation.

"If he's going to meddle in Arcadia that problem might just fix itself," she said. "The Courts are on war footing; they'll be shooting everything that moves."

"The first step always works, Hedge," he reminded her. "It may backfire later but it's a virtual certainty he'll make it into the city."

The dark-haired woman grimaced.

"That sounds like you're asking me to do ward work," she said. "Breaking those I can manage, White, but *making* them? That stuff is hellishly complicated and it blows up if you get even one number wrong."

Hanno had been about to suggest a mere alarm measure instead of something more taxing when he saw Delosi troops coming down from the upper levels. The White Knight felt curiosity rise when the officers among them ignored the efforts of the other soldiers and headed straight for him. The highest-ranked among them, a weedy woman with a commander's insignia branded on her breastplate, came forward and saluted sharply.

"Lord White," she greeted him. "There's been an accident."

"A large one, for a commander to come inform me personally," he said.

"There was a fire in the House of Ink and Parchment," the commander said. "An entire wing collapsed. Casualties involve several members of the Secretariat."

Hanno's eyes sharpened.

"Which ones?" he asked.

The commander didn't know since she was not high-ranking enough to be cleared for the information, as it turned out, but she'd been provided with a list. For once Delos' obsession with records was saving time instead of costing it. The olive-skinned hero scanned the scroll, skipping the names of anyone not ranked Secretary – anyone below that had no real influence in the city. *Secretary Colchis, Secretary Mante, Secretary Theolian. Secretary of War Euphemia.* Every single high-ranked member of the Secretariat who'd at any point spoken in favour of Delos continuing to intervene in the war past the siege.

"That fire was not an accident," he said quietly. "It was enemy action."

Hedge looked at him grimly.

"You think the Tyrant used the assault as a distraction?" she asked.

"Wasn't our Kairos who did this," Aoede said.

Hanno released the handle of his sword. The Bard had not been there a moment ago, but in between a single blink of his eyelids she had... filled the space. Arm slung over Hedge's shoulder, the Wandering Bard for once wasn't smiling.

"You should have some memories about this," Aoede told him. "This is-"

She never got to finish. Of the twenty-odd officers that surrounded them, over half had weapons in hand: the Bard vanished before a knife could take her in the belly, wielded by the very commander who'd brought him news.

"*Stand down*," Hanno barked, blade in hand.

In the span of a single heartbeat the hero noticed three things. First, all the officers with their weapons out looked horrified. Second, there was the faintest trickle of power inside them. And third, they were now turning their weapons on themselves. The White Knight dropped his sword and wrestled down the commander before she could slit her own throat, but Hedge was not so quick. The others dropped to the ground, dying or dead, before anything else could be done. The commander stopped fighting back after a moment and he only just managed to keep her from biting off her tongue. Name pulsing, Hanno focused on the power he'd glimpsed. He managed to feel five layers of something before it was gone, washed away before he even tried to make it disappear.

"Commander," he said calmly, releasing her mouth. "Are you with me?"

The woman blinked.

"Lord White?" she croaked. "Why am I on the ground?"

Hanno got back to his feet, helped her up.

"Can you remember anything unusual that happened to you today?" he said.

The officer paled.

"No," she admitted.



"She wouldn't," Hedge said quietly. "Someone Spoke to her."

The Ashuran glanced at his companion.

"You've seen this before?" he asked.

"I know the theory," the Wizard replied. "Five orders. One to wipe the memory, one trigger, one act and two contingencies."

This... he'd seen this before. Fought this before. The White Knight closed his eyes, breathed in and out until his heartbeat slowed and then ceased entirely. In that moment, his mind filled. A thousand lifetimes he had lived yet not lived, spread across centuries. Hanno focused, filtered through two points: compromised officers, high-tier leadership crippled. Seventh Crusade, White Knight. No, opponent was the Dead King. First Proceran War, Good King. No, this wasn't bribery. *The Paladin, fall of the Blessed Isle. Conquest.* Commander of the vanguard and the western flank assassinated, had to be replaced by officers less seasoned. Every outpost off the Isle gone dark. Sentries made unable to see the placement of goblinfire at the base of the walls. His heartbeat returned.

"Calamities," Hanno spoke. "We're fighting the Calamities, and they're about to attack."

There was a sensation in the back of his head, like a lever being pulled, and a ward covering the Lower Plaza awoke.

A faint smell hit his nostrils and soldiers began dropping like flies.

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Alkmene wasted a good two heartbeats looking at Hanno like he'd just murdered her puppy. The Calamities, as in those scary Praesi fuckers up north with a graveyard full of heroes behind their lair? Shit. *Shit.* Words stronger than shit, which were not coming at the moment because oh Gods they were all about to die. *Productive panic, Hedge,* she reminded herself. *Productive panic is how we survive.* They were now inside a ward, which had been remotely triggered and until now had been hidden behind the much larger magical emanations coming from that godsdamned drill from the Hells. Alkmene tested the strength of said ward with her mind and found she might as well be trying to bring down a wall by pelting it with pastries. Modify it? And now the back of her eye was itching, just from a light probe. Whoever had designed that pattern was a vicious bastard and a half. All that was left was alleviating the effects, then. Her teachers had always taught that that a Gifted faced with a ward could only do three things: break, modify or alleviate. By the looks of it, this one was a straight translocation ward that was bringing in some kind of gas at a fixed rate.

Hedge pulled up a scarf from under her robes and covered her mouth. Most poisons could be outright ignored by Named and the rest could be burned out with a trick, but quantity ingested did influence how well that worked. From the way all the Delosi were stiffening and falling to the ground so quickly, this was not a weak brew. Not magical in nature though. That made things easier. Muttering a word of power, Alkmene created a ball of air in the middle of the plaza. The translucent sphere began spinning, sucking in the gas as fast as it could. She kept murmuring and it kept expanding, devouring more and more. Wouldn't save many of the soldiers, but it would at least make sure their band didn't go into the fight with enough paralysis poison in their lungs to kill a dozen oxen. Ash, in the middle of the incapacitated men, slammed her staff against the paving stones. There was a pulse of power and the people on the ground began breathing again, turning this from a massacre to a crippling blow. On the other hand, by doing that she'd... Hanno was running towards her sister faster than anyone in plate should be able to, but he wouldn't get there in time.

A red wedge immediately opened up in the sky above Irene and a burning rock the size of a house fell through.

Alkmene cursed, flicked her wrist and sent the ball of air straight at the projectile. For a heartbeat it seemed like it would push it back, but then with a pop the spell gave. It was just enough of a delay that her sister was able to prepare herself, thank the Gods. Before the pocket meteorite could smash her into paste Irene was swallowed by a cloud of ash that swirled around her before spearing upwards. The rock itself turned into ash when it made contact, hitting the ground and obscuring the entire plaza in a thick cloud. Alkmene sharpened her eyes just before visibility went and winced at what she saw. Irene's eyes were already grey, which was a bad sign. She'd already used too much power. The Hedge Wizard set that aside the moment she began to feel another spell being crafted, and looked upwards. There was a ball of opaque blue light hovering in the sky above the city, a stable shielding ward. The Warlock, she realized with a dry swallow. She was going to have to fight that. What had her teachers called getting into a mage's duel with Praesi again? *Death by stupidity*, she remembered. But godsdamnit, she'd have to anyway. If the Warlock was busy with her he wasn't smashing everything down here to bloody chunks. Alkmene cursed again and fished out three tiles from her pockets.

She threw them ahead of her, watched them form three steps hovering in the air.

"You don't have to win, Hedge," she encouraged herself. "Just, you know, not get horribly killed. It's all about the standards."

Nervously laughing, she began the climb up.

—

Even as the ash billowed past him, Hanno replayed the sequence of events of the last sixty heartbeats in his mind. Nonlethal but dangerous ward that affected mundane soldiers, triggered as the opening move. Their spellcaster moved to mitigate the damage, taking herself out of the equation. Their healer then attempted to heal the affected, leaving herself wide open for retaliation while the other two fighters in their band were too far away to intervene.

Had the Ashen Priestess been a common healing Named, that projectile would have killed her instantly.

They'd almost lost a fourth of their fighting strength before the first exchange was over, and that realization sent a shiver up his spine. These were not military tactics, they were *hero-killing* tactics. Targeting people in their charge to make them expend effort, then immediately striking their weak point with overwhelming force. Their opponents were not only used to fighting heroes, they were used to fighting *bands* of heroes. The White Knight calmed his mind. There would be three of them. The Warlock was in the sky, and Hedge was moving to distract him. Now he needed to find the Captain and the Black Knight before they could take one of his companions out.

"Ash," he called out. "Champion."

"We here," the Champion yelled back.

"One, five," a man's voice calmly said. "Brazier."

Magic flared in the distance and the place where the Champion's voice had come from burst into flames. The light was enough for Hanno to make out a lone silhouette to his left. A man. Short, in plate with a heater shield and a longsword. The White Knight, without making a sound, headed in that direction. With a burst of speed he emerged behind the man and rammed his blade in this back — only to pierce through shadows that collapsed into a pool before snaking away along the ground. There was a faint whistle and he ducked under a crossbow bolt, almost missing the second one aimed at his knee. He managed to parry that one at the last moment, though it marked his armour. The hero could still feel the presences of Ash and the Champion, dimmed. They were still alive, though the fire had hurt. Gritting his teeth, he made his choice and followed the shadows.

They were swift, but not swift enough to outpace a hero on foot. After a few moments it became glaringly obvious he was being led away from the plaza, towards the second level of the city. The sound of fighting erupted behind him, the Champion hooting in joy, but he'd have to trust they could handle themselves. Leaving the Black Knight unattended with an ash cloud as cover was just

asking for one of them to die. Hanno found steps under his feet, a sure sign he was leaving the plaza, and shortly afterwards felt the pressure over his shoulders vanish: he'd left the bounds of the ward. The ash cloud behind him, the hero looked for his opponent and found him almost instantly. In the middle of the avenue stood a man, in a bare suit of plate that had the marks of frequent use. His shield had no heraldry painted on it, his sword went without decoration. The only splash of colour was those unsettlingly pale green eyes that could be seen through the slits of the helm.

"You're a long way from home, Black Knight," Hanno said.

The man did not reply. He moved forward, shield raised. The White Knight felt the Light flood his veins, scouring his insides, and with hard eyes met the enemy.

—

The enemy had made a mistake when they'd chosen poison as their means of attack. The method had been clever enough, Irene would concede, as the sheer quantity of poison had made it hard to counteract. Now that she had this much ash to work with, however, it was child's play to neutralize the effects. After absorbing the airborne toxin with it she'd directly targeted the enemy ward with her power, since Alkmene was apparently incapable of doing as much. Hammering blindly at sorcery with miracles tended to lead to unpredictable side effects, so instead of destroying the ward she'd erased the part that was bringing in the gas. Or at least she'd begun doing that, before nine feet of plate and muscle with a giant hammer had come for her head. How they'd not seen or heard the behemoth approach, given that the ash cloud had settled on the ground by then, was beyond her. Likely the woman's Name was involved. Regardless, the Champion had stepped in before her earthly body could be made an earthly corpse.

"You not just big girl," said heroine enthused, narrowly avoiding a swing. "You *biggest* girl."

"I'm flattered," the Captain replied politely. "But also thrice your age and married."

The Ashen Priestess had never thought much of fighting banter. If you had breath for it, you weren't trying to kill your opponent hard enough. The Champion was more or less holding the enemy at bay for now, so she focused on the ward again. She could see why her sister had found the structure troublesome: there were little patterns that would make even looking at it dangerous for a mage. Doing so through the lens of a miracle, however, meant it could not touch her. Irene began sharpening her power into a chisel again, breaking one rune after another. Her soul was only loosely attached to her body by a chord, high in the sky as she continued chipping away at the ward. The Priestess smiled as she

wiped another cluster, then felt the chord being tugged. Looking downwards she saw the Champion's shield getting caved in by a hammer blow, quickly followed by the heroine getting punched in the face. Both hits she had gotten by standing between the villain and Priestess' immobile body. Irene had seen the Champion laugh off a horse's kick, but after that punch she spat blood before forcing the Captain back. She then unkindly slapped Irene's body in the face a second time, the chord forcefully dragging the heroine back inside at the impact.

"Ashy," Champion grunted as the Priestess blearily opened her eyes. "Get your *miera* joint. This no stroll in park."

Irene eyed her companion in confusion before she caught the meaning. *Get your shit together*, Rafaella had meant.

"The ward's out of play," she said. "I'm back."

"Good," the Champion said. "Two-time big girl now."

Said 'girl' was not currently attacking them, Priestess could not help but notice. The Captain was not wearing a helmet so the studded earring in her left ear was quite visible. And currently glinting with sorcery.

"Confirmed," the Captain said. "Going full tilt."

"I no like sound of this," the Champion admitted, throwing away her crumpled shield and hoisting her axe.

"It's nothing personal," the villain said. "I was given an order, and now I **Obey**."

The moment she spoke the word, her presence in Creation became *heavier*. Aspect. Well, that was going to be troublesome. The Ashen Priestess reached for her miracles as the Captain blurred into motion.

—

Hanno's sword slid off the shield and he backpedalled to avoid the blades that would have scythed through his knees. At least now he knew how the villain had shot two crossbows at him earlier: the Black Knight's shadow extended into two tendrils behind his back, the two of them wielding swords simultaneously to the villain's own movements. The sheer amount of fine control that had to go in that was staggering, not that the hero had time to stop and stare: even with the Light sharpening his reflexes beyond human capacity he was having trouble coming close without taking a hit. The first time the villain had revealed the tendrils he'd waited until their blades were locked before plunging two blades straight into the White Knight's neck: they'd gone through the gorget and would have gone on to his spine under

it if he hadn't detonated the Light beneath his skin to blow them back. The burns from that were painful, and unlike other wounds wouldn't start healing given enough time.

Hanno breathed out, having a little space, and timed his advance. The first shadow-wielded sword skimmed his shoulder as he shot forward, trailing sparks. The second came down in a swing but he rolled forward, landing on his feet just in time to parry a lunge that would have gone straight through his eye. The White Knight slapped away the shield, flicked his wrist, and with wide eyes saw the fuse on a clay ball reaching the bottom. It exploded in his face, throwing him back. Before he even landed on the ground the Black Knight was behind him, shadow tendrils swinging swords at the height of his neck and torso. Gritting his teeth, Hanno detonated the Light on his side to stop his momentum – it blew straight through his plate. He took a shield bash to the face, blinding him, and then felt a blade go straight through the elbow joint of his sword arm. Biting down on a scream, he reached for his Name and let out a pulse of blinding light. By the time he was steady again, the Black Knight was twenty feet away and the shadow limbs were aiming crossbows at him.

The hero moved his blade to the hand with a functioning elbow behind it. He wasn't as good with his left as his right, but it was a near thing. At the moment he could only see two shadow tendrils, but Hanno wasn't falling for that again. He'd seen a third one hiding those goblin munitions behind the shield, after knocking it aside. The crossbows drew back, however, when both Named heard the sound of marching troops coming down the avenue leading up to the third level. Reinforcements, the Ashuran thought. Alone against the villain they would be wheat waiting for the sickle, but with him too? No matter how many limbs the Black Knight had, he only had one torso. The Delosians spread across the length of the avenue in a shield wall, bowmen setting up behind them. The villain's limbs retracted and he patiently waited for the soldiers to approach. What was he... *No*.

"Retreat," the White Knight bellowed.

"Two, five through eight," the green-eyed man spoke calmly. "Half."

Hanno felt magic flare in the distance and saw the villain flatten himself against the ground. He followed suit, and a heartbeat later felt the warmth of a spell pass above him. He got back on his feet as soon as his senses told him the danger was past, jaw tightening when he saw the aftermath of the sorcery. Every soldier in the avenue had been cut through at the waist as if by a giant blade. Blood and viscera stained the stone even as the men twitched away the last of their lives.

"Warlock, you have bleed," the Black Knight said. "Walls were damaged. Recalibrate."

Some of the houses had been sliced through as well, Hanno saw, but he was far past caring. He'd just seen two hundred men butchered like animals quicker than you could fill a glass. The White Knight breathed out, mastering his fury. *I do not judge*. To take justice in his own hands was surrendering his blade to chaos. Only the judgement of the Heavens was not limited by the shackles of mortal perspective.

**"Ride,"** Hanno hissed, running.

Light howled into existence, sharpening itself into a steed that the White Knight mounted without missing a beat. His sword returned to its sheath as he devoured the distance, a blinding lance of light forming in his extended hand. The Black Knight cocked his head to the side and the shadow tendrils extended from his back. Hanno waited for the swords, but instead they extended even further and pushed the villain off the ground like giant spider legs, tossing him towards a rooftop to the left. By the time the Ashuran got to where the villain had stood there was nothing left to charge. The mount disappeared a heartbeat later and the lance with it, Hanno landing on his feet. His gaze turned to the rooftop, where the Black Knight was studying him.

"Two, six," the man said. "Pitch."

Everything went dark just as the tiredness from using the aspect hit him.

—

"Oh, *come on*," Hedge yelled as she started falling.

It had been bad enough when little dots of red light that burned straight through everything began pursuing her, but now this? There was no way using giant snakes made of flames as a mobile semi-sentient defence could be considered reasonable. Mages used those as a fancy knockout-punch, not *decoration*. She only had two tiles left – that little dot surprise had punched straight through one before she learned what they did – which meant she wasn't so much ascending as leaping from one stair to another. While at least a league up in the sky, pursued by killer lights and *very insistent giant fire snakes*. Normally the absolute sheer terror knotting up her guts would have been crippling, but having come within an inch of death seven times within the last few moments she'd punched straight through that ceiling of fear into another realm of fresh and previously unexplored horror. She was never going use a staircase again, and anyone who tried to make her was going to spend the rest of their life as the ugliest frog she could manage.

The Hedge Wizard summoned the two tiles back to her, shoving one under her feet hastily so she'd stop freefalling. The dots were slow enough they'd take a bit to catch up, but she was now

officially back in snake trouble territory. The odd-eyed woman winced as she saw the spell construct's jaw unhinge. Just before it closed on her she muttered a word of power and both she and everything she touched turned into flame, just long enough for the snake to pass through her. She came out of it wearing fuming robes and knowing she was running out of tricks to survive that. Her Name allowed her to use and understand sorceries so wide in scope and different in nature that it was effectively impossible for anyone else to know them all, but it did have one glaring flaw: she could never use the same trick twice the same day. Her bag wasn't running low, at the moment, but it was certainly running low with things she could use to avoid giant flaming snake death. This was, she reflected, a bit of a problem.

She wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer, while the Warlock did not even seem to be running his actual defences. Could he even, from inside that bubble ward? He'd been casting area-wide magic sporadically, but she wasn't actually getting any spikes in magic from in there when he did. There was actually a non-negligible chance he was just triggering distant wards while overseeing the battlefield. The most direct action he'd taken so far was the pocket meteor, and that was before she'd found him in the sky. *So if I break that bubble, I might be disrupting their entire plan.* That was the kind of risk she had to take, horrifying as that notion was. Alkmene did not think they were going to pull through this otherwise, not with how dim she could feel the others getting. Hanno was getting the worst of it, she sensed, but whoever Champion was scrapping with was delivering a hell of a beating. Hedge gingerly rolled her shoulders, watching the swarm of light dots approaching.

The wizard summoned her free tile to her hand and tapped the one she was standing on three times. It broke her heart to destroy an artefact she'd made so recently – because of their equally recent flying tower fiasco, as it happened – but it was marginally better than getting destroyed herself. The tile began lengthening and she ran down the length, feeling it becoming more and more brittle the longer it spread. Halfway to the bubble it shattered under her feet. She managed to get the second one in place before beginning to fall, angling it so it served as a sloped ramp. Immediately she began sliding off but another word of power had her soles sticking to the surface, allowing her to start running upwards. Not, unfortunately, fast enough to lose the dots. Hedge muttered under breath and flicked her wrist: a ghost image of her, reproducing her magical signature, began running away across thin air. The dots weren't sentient at all, unlike the snakes, so it would be enough to fool them.

One of said snakes managed to loop back to her right before she got to the bubble, though, leaving her only an instant to make her decision. She went with the risk, since her last tile was already beginning to break. She leapt on top of the bubble and



pressed herself against the ward, hoping to all the Gods the snakes had been designed not to collide with the bubble. The fire construct veered away at the last moment and she clenched her fist in triumph. Not dying, her favourite kind of victory. Immediately she began tinkering with the ward beneath her. Unlike the first one they'd been hit with, this one had been designed to weather a beating instead of being hard to modify. Small favours. No doubt the Warlock already knew she was there, so her window would be very, very small. Huh, this was actually massively strong. She could have unloaded her entire arsenal at this and barely scratched it. Were the villains under the impression she was a slugger kind of mage?

With a smile of triumph, she switched the last two runes, preparing the fae flame even as a circular hole in the bubble opened.

There was no Warlock inside.

There was, however, an unstable elemental matrix that had only been kept from exploding by the containment ward.

"You utter *asshole*," she managed to say before it blew up.

—

The warhammer came down and shattered Champion's shoulder, then spun to turn her left kneecap into powder. The Captain did not even attempt to kill the downed heroine this time, going directly for Irene. She'd learned from that initial mistake.

"**Heal**," the Ashen Priestess murmured.

The shoulder snapped back into place, the knee yanked itself up and the Levantine woman got back on her feet. Irene had been tapping into her aspect for over half the fight and it was starting to take a toll. The wounds healed themselves more slowly now, and not as fully. Given how absurdly tough the Champion was she was able to walk it off anyway, but it was a game of diminishing returns. In more ways than one: the Captain's hammer came down on the box of light surrounding the Priestess three times before Rafaella was able to engage her again. After the third blow the box thinned, and Irene was certain if the villain had time for a fourth it would outright break. If it did, she gave it half and half odds she survived the experience. Unfortunately the Champion now got back into the fight a little slower every time while Captain showed no sign of tiring. Whatever aspect she'd used earlier wasn't empowering her by much, but it *wasn't running out*. This had effectively become an endurance match, which villains weren't supposed to be able to win. They would this time, though, because the Calamities had hit when their band was fresh from turning back an enemy assault.

That did not feel like a coincidence.

"Champion," Irene called out.

"Small busy right now," the Levantine replied, ducking under a hammer blow.

The mere force of the swing was enough to kick up a cloud of ash behind them.

"I need you to buy me sixty heartbeats," she said.

"Also want moon and stars?" Champion complained.

"It's that or we die," the Priestess frankly replied.

Rafaella smashed her battle axe into the behemoth's plate, driving her back a step and cracking the metal.

"Dying not good," the Levantine conceded.

The Captain leapt back.

"I need Burden in, um," she said. "Big square in the middle."

There was a pause.

"I'm not Black, Wekesa," she retorted irritably. "I don't keep track of where everyone goes all the time."

Thirty heartbeats left. She could make it. Her aspect continued ebbing as she pushed another one to the surface. That was the limitation on Heal – she could keep it going, but making it *stop* took time. There was a flare of magic in the distance and suddenly the box flared into existence above her head. A moment later it broke and massive pressure forced her to her knees. Champion was still on her feet even if she was buckling, she saw, but Captain seemed almost unaffected. The hammer rose and she blurred again.

**"Oppose,"** the Champion laughed.

There was a sound like a crack made in the weave of Creation and the pressure lifted. Rafaella's axe smashed into the head of the hammer that would have split open the Priestess' head, the impacts perfectly matched. Both weapons flew back and Captain warily stepped away.

**"Ignite,"** Irene croaked out.

All over the field, the ashes began smouldering. She could feel them pulse in harmony with heartbeat, as much a part of her as any limb. The heat rose and the ashes began rising into the air,

forming into spears. The Captain took a look around, then cracked her neck.

"Been a while," she said. "It won't be gentle."

The villain's eyes turned blood red, her body convulsed and she began *shifting*. They were, it seemed, not yet out of the woods. Worse, the woods were starting to look rather hungry.

—

This was not working, Hanno thought as the blade sheared through his cheek. The wound began to heal almost immediately, but his Name didn't replace blood. Of which he had lost too much already. The White Knight's eyes narrowed when he saw his opponent giving ground. He was hearing something. Was the villain ordering another strike? Hanno sharpened his hearing, catching only the last words.

"Listen closely."

Then the munitions detonated. The hero hissed, involuntarily clasping his free hand to an ear. The man had used the elongated sticks that made light and noise earlier, but this was different — it made only noise, but was *horribly* loud. In that moment where pain filled Hanno's thoughts, the Black Knight made his move. The olive-skinned hero brought up his sword in time to parry the first strike and sidestep the tendril-moved blade that would have sunk straight in his carotid. But he took the shield bash to the face, and then the other shadow-wielded blade went through the slight space between his breastplate and the lower parts of his armour that only mail covered. The sword chipped on the rings, but it tore through his guts anyway. The sword in the villain's hand drew back, and in that movement Hanno read his death. It would take him in the eye, killing him in a way no Name could prevent. The world slowed. It wasn't about power, the White Knight knew. He'd gauged how much both their names could throw around, and he trumped his opponent handily. It was the disparity in skill and experience. Hanno did not have any tricks his opponents had never seen before, and he had not seen most of his opponent's.

That had always been going to be the way, he'd known from the start. He would have to go against villains who'd been around for decades longer than he, who'd been accumulating power and skill long before he'd even been born. It was why he'd left for the Titanomachy instead of going north to die like the others. *I am not enough, but I am more than me*. The Light flooded his veins again where it had started to ebb and he silently spoke the word he needed to.

**Recall.**

They flooded through his mind until he sorted them by height and build. *Knight Errant*. Hanno's body moved by itself, the reflexes of his Name replacing his own. He leaned backwards, the tip of the villain's sword passing just above his nose, and his hand closed around the grip of the sword in his gut. Ignoring the struggling shadow tendril, he hit the Black Knight in the chest with the pommel. The impact bought him a moment he flawlessly used to spin around his opponent. The very instant they were back to back he slapped away the tendril-moved sword that would have taken the back of his knee and with two swords in hand stepped away from his opponent. The villain did not miss a beat, stepping into a lunge that Hanno turned into a parry that knocked the sword out of the man's hand. It did not stop him: a tendril caught the sword and swung for this throat as the other one slapped another blade into the palm of his armoured hand. No, this wouldn't work either.

He touched the flood again. *Righteous Spear*. Tossing away the villain's weapon, Hanno felt the sword in his hand flare with light and turn into the spear he needed. A parting gift from the Gigantes, a weapon that could be whatever his Name required. The barbed tip of his spear flicked towards the villain's throat but bounced off the shield. The Black Knight immediately closed the distance and Hanno spun with the man's swing, shaft of the spear coming to knock down the side of the shield before he spun back to – to have the shaft be caught by a shadow tendril. Weapon forced out of his hand, Hanno touched the flood again. *Sage of the West*. His armoured gauntlet expertly caught the side of the shield and he leveraged his weight to slam it into the villain's own helm. The man was caught off guard long enough for Hanno to slide under his guard and flip him over his back. He pivoted smoothly to hammer his heel into the villain's helmet but the side of his greaves was caught.

**"Destroy,"** the Black Knight said.

The life he'd been tapping into... disappeared. Like smoke. He was the White Knight again, standing awkwardly with his foot in his opponent's grasp. The villain grunted and smashed him into the ground like rag doll. Tendrils of shadows with two dozen of the clay balls from earlier wrapped around him, all lit. Hanno touched the flood again. *Thief of Stars*. He slid out of the bindings, though the edge of the explosions caught him. He was tossed to the ground, landing in an ungainly sprawl. It wasn't enough. He'd have to... The coin appeared in one hand as his weapon reformed in a burst of light in the other.

**"Burn,"** an indifferent voice ordered.

The stream of flame caught him in the chest. His plate was of the finest steel that could be found in the Free Cities and still it *boiled* in the blink of an eye. The force behind the flames was

brutal, driving him into the pavement as the stone scorched and cracked around him. Mercifully, it ceased. The time to worry about the state of his body after the fight was past, Hanno acknowledged. He breathed out and let the Light fill him. He'd lost hold of the Thief, now the White Knight once more, and his body hoisted itself back to its feet. Flesh a tapestry of red and black, he stood to face his enemies. There were two, now. The Black Knight and his sorcerous accomplice. A tall black man in burgundy robes, currently eyeing him with distaste.

"Wekesa," the Black Knight said. "The Wizard?"

"Survived the blast," the Warlock replied. "Currently chasing my second fake."

"Then why are you here?" the other villain asked.

"The Tyrant is retreating."

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"You're certain?" the Black Knight said.

The sorcerer rolled his eyes.

"No, I confused them with the *other* besieging army that's leaving," he deadpanned.

"A backstab I expected, but a retreat?" the Knight murmured, then shook his head. "Are any of them on their third aspect?"

"Sabah's got her two on their second, the Wizard hasn't even used one," the dark-skinned man said.

The Black Knight sighed, then sheathed his sword.

"We can no longer win this," he said. "Full retreat."

"They're on the ropes, Black," the Warlock said.

"Yes," the other villain agreed darkly. "We have them cornered, with all their trump cards left. That is not a story that ends well for us."

"You're not getting away," Hanno and the Light said.

The Warlock glanced at him then smiled unpleasantly.

"Well, you say that, but..."

Everything went dark again.

—

It was night out when Irene finally hit her limit.

Hanno would survive, which was what mattered. The magical burns had been nothing she hadn't seen before, if never quite so severe, but there'd been some things she could not fix. There were two patches of skin gone almost stone-like on the side of his neck and a few others on his side that seemed able to simply ignore her miracles. It was like the Heavens saw nothing there that needed to be healed. She'd have to ask him about it, when he woke up. Her sister was sprawled across a chair behind her, looking exhausted, and the Champion was snoring away loudly on the only other bed in the room. She didn't begrudge the Levantine that in the slightest: she'd had most bones in her body broken at least three times, and Irene had not had the power left to both soothe away the lingering pains and deal with the White Knight's wounds. Washing away the last of the peeled-off skin with the wet cloth, Irene dropped the resulting mess in the water bowl by her side.

"He's rather plain for a hero, isn't he?" Alkmene said quietly, studying their leader.

"That speaks well of him," Irene replied, dragging herself up. "Means he's not vain."

She brought a short stool next to her sister's seat and with a sigh dropped her head on Alkmene's arm. The odd-eyed woman stroked her hair affectionately.

"You know what I mean," her sister said. "Look, we didn't change much when we became Named but there were *some* changes. I'm a little thinner. You're taller than me by at least an inch more than before."

"That's because he's a Judgement boy," the Bard said.

Both sisters flinched at the interruption. Aoede was sitting by Hanno's bedside, pulling at a bottle of rum.

"Where have *you* been all day?" Irene asked flatly.

"Nowhere," the Bard grimaced. "They've figured out a few things."

It would have been impolite for either of them to pursue this any further, unfortunately. One did not simply ask another Named how their Name affected them. The answers tended to be intensely personal, and sometimes forcing an answer could have grave consequences for everyone involved. The olive-skinned woman brushed back her curls, waving her bottle.

"But like I said, it's because he's a Judgement boy," she continued. "The Seraphim don't have a lot of tolerance for self-delusion. You're taller 'cause in your head you were that much taller than your sister. Irene is thinner 'cause she never thought of herself as going to keep those pounds."

"That's fascinating," her sister said blandly, reaching for a pitcher of wine and pouring herself a cup. "And you didn't warn us the fucking *Calamities* were coming to town because?"

"Here's a warning, since you want one. Don't drink that," the Bard replied easily

Irene frowned and her sister pulled away her hand from the cup like she'd been burned.

"Why?" the Priestess asked.

"There's five Calamities," Aoede said. "You've met three. One's retired. And the last one is..."

"Assassin," Irene whispered, eyeing the cup like it was snake. "It's poisoned?"

"And just when the both of you are flat out of power to burn," the Bard said admiringly. "None of us ever saw a whisk of him, and he's still come closest to killing a hero today."

Priestess found her hands were shaking.

"They've learned to work around me some," Aoede said quietly. "There's rules. I knew they were coming but not *when*."

Irene waved away the unspoken recriminations they'd been offering. The Bard was not the enemy.

"Merciful Gods," Alkmene muttered. "This has not been our day."

"We've got some time before Hanno is back on his feet," Priestess said. "We can rest a bit."

"Seven days and seven nights before he wakes," the Bard said. "Only one thing to do until then."

"And what's that?" Irene asked, raising an eyebrow.

The bottle of rum landed in her lap.

"For once," the Ashen Priestess said, bringing the bottle to her lips, "I think you might actually be right."

## **Chapter 8: Lies**

*"Invading? Good Gods, of course not. We're merely manoeuvring."*  
-Dread Empress Sinistra II "the Coy", after being hailed by the garrison of Summerholm

Archer hadn't changed at all since I last saw her. Fine white chainmail went down from her throat to her knees, splitting in a

skirt. Over it she wore a long leather coat that came up in a hood that was currently down. The dark green linen she'd covered her face with last time had not been brought up, leaving open her exotic dark ochre face and hazelnut eyes. Only people across the Tyrian Sea had that skin tone: not the Baalites or the Yan Tei but those from some faraway land whose inhabitants were known only as the tigersmen. The pair of longknives at her hips were sheathed and her ridiculously large longbow still strapped to her back, along with a quiver full of arrows closer in size and thickness to javelins than anything else. Even under the armour faint curves could be glimpsed, and there was no denying she was almost as good-looking as she thought she was.

"Lady Archer," Hakram greeted her respectfully.

She'd pretty much mauled him effortlessly on their first encounter, which tended to leave positive impression on orcs. I brushed off Archer's arm, frowning at her.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

She ignored me, to my irritation. Huh. I wasn't used to people doing that anymore. Whether they were my enemies or my friends, everyone paid attention when I glared these days. That had a way of happening when you'd killed as many people as I had.

"Sweetcheeks," she grinned at Masego. "How are we?"

"Less than pleased by the appellation," Apprentice replied.

"It's a compliment," she assured him.

"Stop verbally molesting my people and answer the question," I said.

She glanced at me, still grinning.

"What's the magic word?" she prompted.

For a heartbeat, I seriously debated ordering Masego to cast something on her. Nothing lethal, just unpleasant. Her hair turning into snakes, maybe. Would that be *magic* enough for her? Ultimately I sighed. This wasn't worth getting into a pissing match for.

"Please," I said.

"Well, since you asked nicely," Archer shrugged. "I was headed for your little city – what's it called again, Marching, Mossboard? – when I spied with my little eye a bunch of very lost villains."

She knew what the name was, I thought, meeting her eyes. She knew I knew she knew what the name was. She was just pulling my



strings because she could. It was good to know that even if the better part of a year had passed she was still a major pain in my ass.

"You are the poison ivy of people," I told her. "Why were you headed for Marchford?"

"Your boss called in her marker for the Hunter incident," Archer replied. "Asked Lady Ranger to send a fae expert."

I smiled thinly.

"So where are they?" I said.

Hakram snorted. Masego looked like he wanted to inform me Archer was the expert even if he knew I was being sarcastic, but barely managed not to.

"That's hurtful, it is," she said, sounding pleased. "My turn to ask the questions then. Why in the all the bloody Hells are you lot this deep in Arcadia?"

I blinked.

"How deep are we, exactly?" Masego asked.

"Not as deep as yo could be, sweetcheeks," Archer replied without missing a beat, wagging her eyebrows. "But to put it in laymen's terms, you're pretty close to Skade."

"The seat of the Winter Court," Apprentice said, sounding surprised. "That shouldn't be possible, we haven't wandered long enough."

"This place seems to have a very loose definition of possible," Hakram grunted.

"The orc gets it," Archer said.

"There's rules even in Arcadia," Masego said flatly.

"The rules in this neck of the woods are whatever the King of Winter says they are," the woman shrugged.

"The implication being that the King wants us in Skade," I said quietly. "That's going to end well."

"Yeah, I meant to ask," Archer said. "What did you guys do to piss off the Winter Court? Did you abduct some of their people?"

"We didn't *do* anything," I complained. "They just showed up one day, started invading my city and got really condescending about not telling me why."

Archer rolled her eyes.

"A few warbands is hardly an invasion," she said.

"Squire's not exaggerating," Hakram said. "They've stated their intention is to conquer Marchford."

The ochre-skinned woman raised an eyebrow.

"That's... unprecedented, as far as I know," she said. "Fae mess around with mortals outside Arcadia all the time, but they don't stay there as a rule. Are you sure you didn't piss them off somehow?"

"I honestly can't think of a way I would have," I replied.

"Huh," she said. "Well, you're still lucky in a way. You're stuck with Winter and they're shit at fighting. Whatever poor bastard is stuck with Summer is in for a rough ride."

"The ones I've fought so far weren't pushovers," I said.

"If you'd been in a scrap with the host of High Noon you'd have a lot more holes in your armour, Squire, and they'd still be smoking," she said. "Summer's the season of war. They always win the round against Winter if it gets to a pitched battle."

Ah, the familiar feeling of being in over my head and yet still glimpsing another peril over the horizon that would be even worse. I was depressing how used to that I'd gotten.

"That's a nightmare for another night," I said. "If you were headed for Marchford then you know a way out of here?"

"Sure," Archer said, and pointed towards the city.

It was still insolently glistening, but at least I had a name for it: Skade. It was also apparently the seat of the Winter Court, so the way my instincts had been screaming *trap, trap, this is a trap* was once again justified.

"Do you have a way out that *doesn't* involve us dying painfully?" I asked.

"I was headed towards a gate before I saw the lot of you," Archer said, "but that's meaningless now. This close to Skade we're going wherever the King wants us to go."

"So if we walk in the other direction..." Hakram said, trailing off.

"We'll get back here in a few hours," she said. "Though if he's pulling that sort of stuff at least he'd not meddling with time."

I sighed. Was I ever going to meet some sort of all-powerful creature that wasn't a real prick about it?

"So to Skade we go," I grunted.

Archer nodded.

"Better keep off the road," she said. "Otherwise they'll see us coming. Wait until night time and try to sneak through?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"We're taking the road," I said. "Apprentice, you have parchment and ink?"

"Oh thank the Gods," Masego muttered, then cleared his throat. "Yes, I do."

"We're going to caught pretty early," Archer pointed out.

"Caught?" I smiled. "Why, we're not hiding. We were, after all, invited."

—

About an hour in we ran into a hunting party. Not in the sense that they were hunting for us, but in the way that Callowan nobles hunted deer and rabbit. There were a dozen fae, all mounted on too-perfect white horses, but among those only four mattered. Two men and two women, colourfully dressed where the others were in drab blue-grey and armour. The nobles — for I was relatively certain that was what they were — immediately took the lead and diverted their party towards us. Of them the first to speak was a man dressed in a tunic of woven shade and starlight which hurt to look at if I did it for too long. My companions spread out warily, but as I'd told them to did not reach for their weapons.

"Well well well," the noble began. "What have we—"

"*Finally*," I interrupted. "You there, the ugly one. Dismount immediately and give me your horse."

I was careful not to point at any guard in particular, letting them decide among themselves exactly who I'd been speaking to. There was a flicker of surprise across all their faces. This was not, it seemed, going the way they'd thought it would. Good.

"Pardon me," the man said. "But what did you just say?"

"I *ordered* your attendant to give me his horse," I corrected haughtily. "I have to say, the reception so far has been most disappointing. I expected envoys to meet us at the border, not for us to have to walk like peasants."

"You are mortals," one of the ladies said, tone bemused.

"I am the Lady of Marchford," I sneered. "Here at the personal invitation of the King of Winter. Obviously you were sent to welcome us, so surrender horses for myself and my retinue. We've wasted enough time."

There was a heartbeat of silence as they all stared at me. I offered back my best impression of Heiress, silently conveying that to such a hallowed personage as myself their mere presence was almost offensive. One of the ladies smiled, her teeth looking more like a crescent moon than bone.

"We welcome you to Arcadia Resplendent, Lady of Marchford," she said. "I am the Marchioness of the Northern Wind. Please forgive the manners of my uncouth companions."

"There is nothing to forgive," I said, my frown heavily implying that there was.

"It will be our pleasure to escort you, my lady," the man who'd not spoken added. "Though it pains me to be so direct, may we see the King's invitation? Since Winter has gone to war, none are allowed to wander without one."

"Of course," I replied dismissively. "Servant, show them the invitation."

I gestured at Archer, who raised a mutinous eyebrow at me.

"Do not tarry, sullen wench," I said, savouring every syllable. "Or it's a smart blow to the ear for you."

She glared at me and grit her teeth but took out the folded sheet of parchment, handing it to a guard. Said guard rode closer to the nobles and presented it. They looked at the parchment, then at us, then to the parchment again. It was fake, of course. I'd known it would be pointless to try to forge something that would pass muster, since we had no idea if invitations like that even existed and what they *would* look like if they did. So I'd gone the other way and made it a *ridiculously obvious* fake. It was even signed 'the King of Winter', since none of us knew what his actual name was. I could see the nobles wanted to immediately call us out on it, but they hesitated. I smothered a grin. It was just like dealing with Praesi. It was a transparent lie, so naturally there had to be something they were missing. Was it a trap aimed at them, perhaps? A true invitation made to look like a fake so they would offend and give pretext for execution?

"This is a false invitation," the first fae to have spoken finally said, tone wary.

My companions stirred, preparing for a fight, but I'd bluffed with thoroughly empty hands often enough to know not to react.

"Aleban, don't be obtuse," the Marchioness laughed. "Of course it's true, look at the signature."

Aleban looked about to protest, then his eyes suddenly narrowed at the Marchioness. The other male fae began to grin nastily and the other woman steered her horse subtly away.

"Since the Marchioness of the Northern Wind states it is true, then it must be," he said sneeringly. "I am sure His Grace will be pleased when you bring them to him for audience."

"Oh, I would never dare overstep my station in this manner," the Marchioness smiled. "The Lady of Cracking Ice is the darling of the Court, surely her hand is best suited for this task."

Said Lady had been the one edging away and even as her face went thunderous as the sudden swerve in conversation I could not help but notice she was quite stunning. Most fae were subtly wrong, with faces too narrow and eyes too large, but this one was outright ethereal. I was almost reminded of Kilian by the cast of her face, though she had sharper cheekbones and paler skin than my lover.

"I simply could not claim this privilege in the face of so many nobles of superior rank," the Lady demurred. "The Baron of Blue Lights humbled us all with his singing last night, surely introducing such hallowed guests would be another feather to his cap."

"You are too kind, my lady," the fae who'd been grinning replied smoothly. "I am but a paltry courtier compared to the might that is the Duke of Sudden Rime. Would it not be best for him to have this honour?"

Aleban, who was apparently a duke, smiled serenely.

"You are too humble, my good Baron," he said. "No one but you is a match for this task. Do you not agree, Marchioness?"

"Oh, most definitely," she said, deploying a fan of pure ivory with a flick of the wrist and hiding her vicious smile.

"It is agreed, then," the Lady of Cracking Ice murmured.

See, that was my favourite part of dealing with schemers. They always thought too deeply, and when it made them uncertain they immediately began passing the potential backfire to someone else. Fae were supposed to be the trickiest creatures in existence: if there was even a speck of uncertainty they'd make sure none of the fallout could mar the hem of their dress. We weren't out of

the pit yet, of course. Even if they went along with it now that didn't mean they wouldn't turn their cloaks the moment we entered Skade and claim they'd been toying with us all along. Got us in the city, though, and that was the first step.

"All of you show me such favour," the Baron said calmly. "I will not soon forget it, I assure you."

The guard returned the 'invitation' to Archer, who looked like she really wanted to stab someone in the face. I hid my glee behind a dignified façade. Ignore me, would she? My vengeance would be as swift as it was petty. Our escort ordered guards to dismount and I paused a moment when I realized that unlike mortal riders, none of them used spurs or even a saddle. There was just a beautiful silk blanket. *Not using the horse for a getaway then*, I thought. I was a more than decent rider these days, but I'd never tried it without a saddle. My companions mounted after I did, with varying degrees of success. Hakram was pleased his horse hadn't begun blindly panicking the moment he approached and Archer was a better rider than me by the looks of it. Masego, on the other hand, was hugging his mount's flanks and looking pale.

"Apprentice," I said, bringing my mount to his side.

"This is unnatural," he muttered back. "Mages walk or fly. This horse business is just asking for a broken neck."

"Sounds like you've got it under control," I lied.

"Is there an issue, Lady of Marchford?" the Baron asked.

I smiled blandly.

"None at all," I said. "By all means, my lord baron, take us to Skade."

"It will be my pleasure," the fae replied darkly, to the amusement of the other nobles.

We set out down the road, the fairies leading the way, and Archer rode closer to me.

"*Sullen wench?*" she hissed.

"You're right," I replied pensively. "That was a bit much. I take back the sullen."

—

I'd seen quite a few beautiful places, in my time.

I'd seen the Silver Lake under moonlight, when it was most deserving of its name. I'd seen the royal palace of Laure, stone and tapestry and centuries of power. I'd walked the halls of the

Tower, where opulence was a given and horror lurked behind every drape. Even the Wasteland had been beautiful in its own harsh way, flickering from storm to blinding sun in the span of a bell. None of them held a candle to Skade. Arcadia was not Creation, and so not bound by its rules. The Winter Court had taken this to heart when it had built its seat. Archways carved from snowstorms, streets made of solid glistening water and even auroras turned into lanterns: it was madness, but a madness utterly bewitching. I could see trees made of ice with leaves of stone that shook in the breeze, bridges of mist linking towers that were solid a moment and gone the next. The gate into Skade was an archway of ever-shifting ice, a high relief that changed the stories it depicted with every look. And in front of it, in two unmoving rows, stood Swords of Waning Day. The same soldiers I'd fought in Marchford, made a silent honour guard. Our party rode up a gentle slope, headed for avenues inside.

Then the first soldiers unsheathed their swords.

For a moment I panicked, but kept my face calm. If this came to a fight we weren't making it out alive: Hakram and I had struggled enough with two, two hundred were far beyond our capacity to handle. Any notion they were taking those out for a salute was dismissed when they turned towards us. No, I noticed after a moment. Not *us*. Archer. Who did not look particularly surprised.

"Soldiers, what is the meaning of this?" the Duke of Sudden Rime asked.

"This one smells of the Darkest Night," one replied, pointing his sword at Archer.

The woman cleared her throat, gave me a sideways look.

"The Lady of the Lake has visited Skade in the past," she said. "She, uh, might have left an impression."

The deadwood soldiers hissed like angry cats when she mentioned the Ranger's title. From the corner of my eye I could see the fae nobles exchanging glances. They looked surprised, then cast very wary looks in my direction. Oh, right. I'd called a pupil of the Ranger a sullen wench and threatened to slap her around. They had to be wondering who the Hells I was to be able to get away with that. I smiled prettily in their direction, which seemed to unsettle them even more.

"She's with me," I said. "And will not fight unless provoked."

"Her mistress took the Prince of Nightfall's eye and set *it on a ring*," the soldier barked.

"It makes for very tasteful jewellery, if that's any consolation," Archer said.

"So this is what dying stupidly feels like," Hakram mused.

"I'm sure Lady Ranger will give it back if he asks nicely," I lied. "Regardless, Archer is part of my retinue. She is not to be touched."

"Who are you to-" the soldier began, before a fracture line ran along the length of his body.

His eyes widened, then he fell into a shower of shards.

"I am bored with this interlude," the Lady of Cracking Ice said. "Shall we proceed?"

We did, and the soldiers gave us a wide berth. I leaned towards Archer.

"And Summer is worse?" I asked.

"Way worse," she said grimly, then lowered her voice. "So we're in the city. What's the plan now?"

"The situation is fluid," I replied. "We're keeping our options open."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Hakram cursed.

I smiled winningly at my companions.

## Chapter 9: More Lies

*"Gentlemen, there is no need to worry: our plan is flawless. The Emperor will never see it coming."*

– Grandmaster Ouroboros of the Order of Unholy Obsidian, later revealed to have been Dread Emperor Traitorous all along

A few years ago I would have been able to enjoy the beautiful madness that was Skade as we rode through it, but being apprenticed to Black had ruined me. Now I was wondering how a city with a population of a several thousand could manage to feed itself when all the fields around it were covered in snow. Or who cleaned the streets for them to remain this pristine. Were there fae street sweepers? If so, were they available for hire? Marchford didn't look nearly as nice. And that was without even getting into the logistics of running a monetary system when everyone and their sister could make illusionary coin. Unless all coin was illusionary? This entire race was giving me a headache just to think about. The rest of my companions seemed more concerned with getting their bearings, which I already knew would be pointless. I'd looked back after we turned a corner twice now and found an entirely different street behind us, the second time even on a different floor. The seat of the Winter Court was



nearing Tower-levels of mindfuckery, though at least it wasn't also full of death-traps and demons. I hoped.

Archer's casual assessment of the Winter King as "pretty much a god" wasn't a significantly better alternative, but I'd take what I could get.

If I was getting out of this with most my organs on the inside, it would be by picking a story and sticking to it. The fact that'd I somehow wiggled my way into being the heroine when facing the Rider of the Host likely meant Arcadia didn't care for my being Evil so long as I *acted* heroic. That broadened my options a great deal. There were at least half a dozen tales about some clear-sighted commoner with a Good heart walking into the court of Callow and unmasking the schemes of wicked courtiers trying to trap them, though my introducing myself as the Lady of Marchford might have killed that in the crib. Trickster stories, then? Trying to outwit fae at the game they'd allegedly invented struck me as asking for an invitation to a feast that lasted a century, but with the story on my side I might pull through. Sadly, I hadn't been abducted by a fairy queen with designs on my virtue so professing my pure-hearted affections for Kilian would be of no use. To be honest I wasn't great with temptation anyway. Wouldn't be sleeping with one of my senior officers if I was.

"Catherine," Hakram said in a rasping whisper. "Watch."

I glanced at the tall orc, then around us. We were riding through a marketplace of sorts, filled to the brim with hundreds of fae. Stalls that were riots of silk and pale wood offered an array of wonders for perusal. Some one-eyed old man with skin dark as a Soninke's was offering a bottled wish, moonlight made silver and the heart of a once-good woman, all set on an elegant quilt of woven winds. Fares just as absurd stretched as far as the eye could see, the entire plaza much too large for the width the surrounding walls suggested. I saw Masego eyeing what a peddler promised to a drop of the blood of the Forever King with sharp interest, so I kicked his foot. He jumped in surprise and then coughed in embarrassment.

"You start buying things here and you'll leave with a dozen different fae owning a slice of your soul," I hissed.

He looked mulish.

"It's not like I'm using *all* of it," he whispered back.

That was the single most Praesi thing I'd ever heard him say and rubbed the bridge of my nose in despair. You'd never find a Callowan selling their soul like that, I thought irritably. Well, except that one time I'd become a villain. So maybe sometimes you found Callowans selling their souls like that, but in most cases

I felt like my opinion held up. I glared at Masego anyway, until he gave up with a huff.

"Don't you pout at me, you're a grown man," I muttered.

When had I become the voice of reason? People were supposed to talk me out of things, not the other way around. Still, this felt dealt with so I turned my attention back to the marketplace. Hakram wouldn't have been interested in the wares here, I was sure. The orc take on having an economy was raising cattle, looting other clans and the occasional bit of barter. Aside from books and booze there wasn't much in Adjutant's tent and I would know: I riffled through his stuff at least once a month when I got bored. So what *had* he been trying to point out to me? I began paying closer to attention to the fae themselves instead of what they haggled over, but how they were dressed wasn't what caught my attention. It was how they behaved.

Two fae bargained over a silver chain almost perfunctorily, going smoothly back and forth until it became clear the man – who looked like a noble fallen on hard times, his robes threadbare and his hands without rings – could not afford the chain. At which point he publicly bemoaned his lack of wealth, going on twice as long as he had while bargaining. There was something wrong here, like they were acting instead of truly talking. Further away I saw a gorgeous but common woman hacking off her beautiful golden locks and offering them in exchange for a precious stone, and that was when it finally *clicked*. On the other side of the market place I found an earnest-looking man pawning off an heirloom ring missing its jewel in exchange for a pretty ivory comb. It was an old tale, one children in Callow grew up hearing about as a warning about blind good intentions. *They're going through stories*, I realized. *All of them*. There wasn't a single outcome here in the hundreds of conversations taking place that wasn't already set in stone.

It was enough to make me shiver. They might almost look like us, but the fae were *other*. Something apart, obeying completely different rules. An entire people of actors going through the motions since before Creation even existed. How many times had they gone through their stories, I wondered? If Roles were grooves worn into Creation by repetition, accumulating power by repetition, then these were an entire race of Named. Everyone from the chimney sweeps to the king himself, following along the paths set for them. And now I'd just walked into the midst of that with a lie on my lips, throwing myself headfirst into a maze of interwoven tales that went back unbroken since the dawn of existence. Gods Below, this was more dangerous than I could have ever dreamed of. I forced a smile on my face and sat ramrod straight on my horse as we passed through the market. I met Hakram's eyes and saw fear there to mirror mine. *We're in over our head. More so than usual.*

"This must be where we part, Lady of Marchford," the Duke of Sudden Rime announced.

I could see interest and fascination in his too-blue eyes as he watched us, having long chased away his initial distaste at our presence. For all that he was more than willing to pawn off responsibility for us to the Baron. Was this a story as well, I wondered? There might not have been an exact precedent for my actions today, but if another tale was close enough they might have moved towards it. Or perhaps not. Their arguing over who'd be responsible for us had felt too organic, not at all like the haggling fae behind us. It had felt like they'd been genuinely unsure of the outcome, no matter how smoothly the conversation had gone. Still, how much could I rely on that impression? Fae were some of the greatest liars to ever exist. There were too many unknowns at play here for me to get a good read on the situation.

"I am *most* certain we will meet again," the Marchioness of the Northern Wind said, flashing hungry teeth. "I look forward to it eagerly."

"I'm sure our dearest Baron will take great care of you," the Lady of Cracking Ice added, smiling at the fae in question.

"Your reception has been most graceful," I replied, careful to avoid even the implication of debt.

The nobles tittered and rode past a house of stone too white to be anything of Creation, disappearing the moment they turned the corner. The Baron turned to us, face expressionless.

"As I've not been given instruction by His Majesty to bring you under his roof, it seems you will be settling in the guest palace," he said.

"That will not be necessary, my lord baron," a voice intervened.

The fae nobles we'd encountered so far had been sharp-faced with even sharper tongues, but none of them had struck me as made for strife. Intrigue yes, and cruelty absolutely but fighting? None of them had the silent assurance of someone used to taking lives. This one, though, looked like he'd been made for war. His mount was ebony, and I did not mean that in a poetic sense: the horse was sculpted out of dark wood, polished so perfectly it could have been black marble. The man himself was wearing a sober long-sleeved tunic with buttons of shade, the sword at his hip slender and without a sheath. I could feel the power in it, and not mere sorcery: it felt like sharpness made object, a principle made into thing. His skin was pale and his cheeks freshly shaved, thin red lips forming a permanent scowl. A black silken blindfold covered one of his eyes, silvery writing sprawled across it. I'd never seen someone who fit the turn of phrase of being *raven-*

*haired* better before: just looking at the dark locks I could almost hear the flap of wings.

"My Prince of Nightfall," the Baron of Blue Lights replied, bowing low.

"That ought to end well," I muttered.

The prince's eye flicked in my direction at the words, meeting my stare. I matched his gaze and found myself peering into darkness, a night so dark no stars would ever grace it. I began to drift from my body until I reached for an older memory, one branded into my soul. I felt my back snapping again, my bones grinding to dust as the weight above spoke a single word: Repent. *I've stared down Hashmallim, fairy, a little dark isn't going to cow me. Night is when villains rule.* I found myself on the horse again, the Prince of Nightfall smiling amusedly.

"His Majesty sends his regards, and grants these awaited guests the use of the Still Courtyard until they can be properly received," the one-eyed creature spoke.

"A great honour," I said, which for all I knew could be true.

Well. Fuck. I'd never seriously hoped the Winter King wouldn't know we were in the city, but him sending what looked like his Court's equivalent of one of the Calamities had not been the plan. Not that I *had* a plan, per se, but this definitely wasn't it. Having Aisha along right about now would have been great, since my companions might all be Named but between the lot of us all we knew about plotting would barely fill a page. Written large. There might even be illustrations.

"I look forward to your attendance of Court on the morrow, Baron," the prince said, the implied dismissal clear.

The Baron of Blue Lights bowed gracefully a second time, eyes lingering on us before he left. Confusion and fear were plain in his gaze. *I feel for you, my friend,* I thought. *There's probably someone out there who knows what's going on, but it's sure as Hells not either of us.* I nodded politely at him and Hakram elbowed Masego so he'd do the same with the rest of us. There was a long moment of silence with only the five of us in the street. The Prince of Nightfall smiled at Archer, somehow conveying a few centuries of hatred in a mere quirk of the lips.

"Did you know, girl, that I once swore if your mistress had a child I would feed it to her?" he idly said.

"The Lady of the Lake isn't one for children," Archer replied with a friendly smile of her own. "She much prefers jewellery."

While I admired the guts behind mouthing off to the immortal creature that had night for eyes, I kind of wanted to throttle her right now. *We don't taunt the monster, Archer. Not when it's already out to get us.* Oh Gods, was this what it felt like being in charge of me? The balance of appalled and impressed was miraculously even. How had Black not had me killed off by now?

"While I'm sure you and the Lady of the Lake have a colourful history," Adjutant said, "we are all here under the banner of the Lady of Marchford."

It was a sad day when the orc in a group was the closest thing you had to a diplomat. I yawned in an almost offensively fake manner to change where this was headed.

"Alas, I am but a feeble delicate young girl and travel has tired me," I said. "Is the Courtyard far, Your Royal Highness?"

"Ah, I forget myself Lady Foundling," the Prince said. "You are well known for your... frailty, after all. It was untoward of me to delay."

There was enough sarcasm injected in that single word to poison a well. I was reluctantly impressed.

"All is forgiven," I drily replied.

"If you and your retainers would follow me, I will lead you to the Courtyard," the one-eyed fae said, his horse moving into a trot without prompting.

We trailed after him and I gestured for Archer to come closer. She leaned in.

"I thought the whole changing-seasons motif meant fae are reborn when their Court comes around again," I said quietly. "Like a cheap cousin to reincarnation."

"It does," she agreed.

"Then he's missing an eye even now because..."

She nodded.

"*Every time?*" I whispered.

"She likes the ring," Archer shrugged.

Whoever had first said that Named became crazier the older they lived clearly had something of a point. It wasn't long before we arrived at the Still Courtyard, though my guess was that it wasn't because it was all that close. More that *everything* in Skade was close, if you were high up enough the fairy food chain. The Prince of Nightfall was royalty, if the title was any

indication, but what exactly that meant I was unsure. Was he related to the king? I wasn't sure whether fae could even have children if they didn't have them with mortals. The Still Courtyard was a low-hanging square building with a front of ornate greenwood pillars and bare stone steps. Through the arched entrance I could see the courtyard it was named after, a pristine garden of untouched freshly-fallen snow. A dozen blue-attired servants were already kneeling outside when we arrived, none of them daring to look up. They didn't even register in the prince's eyes, as far as I could see.

"I hope your rest will be peaceful," the raven-haired fae said.

Ah, implied threats thrown our way by someone who could kill me with relative ease. He was making this feel like home. The Prince cast a look at Archer, then moved on.

"I will see you all in Court on the morrow," he added. "Until then, Lady of Marchford."

"Looking forward to it, Your Royal Highness," I replied with insincere enthusiasm.

The Prince of Nightfall rode away without glancing back, leaving us and the servants alone. They were still kneeling, so I cleared my throat.

"So," I said. "About those rooms."

They rose, and as I peered at them I saw they were... hesitant. Not afraid, I decided, but unsure of what they were supposed to do. *They're not used to having guests, I thought, or maybe just not mortal ones.*

"I am the steward for this courtyard, Hallowed Ones," a female fae said, bowing before us. "We are honoured by your presence and have arranged chambers for your leisure."

I thought about asking for her name but held myself back. No, it wouldn't do to get too involved: I might be stepping into a story by accident. I looked down at my armour, which was sadly full of holes where people had taken it upon themselves to stab me, then at Hakram's similarly scarred set of plate.

"I could use a nap and a bath," I said. "How about you lot?"

Apprentice leaned forward on his horse.

"Does this courtyard have a library?" he asked.

Well, good to see he still had his priorities on order. I swore on all the Hells, if Masego landed at the bottom of the sea the first thing he'd ask the mermans was if there were any books around.

"It does, Hallowed One," the steward said. "Maeve can take you to it, if you so desire."

Maeve was, from the look of it, a very pretty servant with a low neckline who was now smiling invitingly at Apprentice. Another servant looked at her, then Masego and his face turned thunderous. Well, I mused. If there was anyone among my companions I could feel pretty safe wouldn't get involved in some deadly fae love triangle, it was Apprentice. Masego gingerly got down from his horse and immediately headed inside, gesturing for the servant to follow him.

"See you later," I called out, then sighed. "Someone stable that horse. We're only borrowing it."

"I could do with a nap," Hakram admitted. "Feels like I've been awake for days."

Odds were decent we had been.

"You should also take a bath," I encouraged.

The orc wrinkled his nose.

"I washed myself in the river when we were returning to Marchford," he said.

"He smells like blood and sweat," Archer commented. "It's quite nice, actually."

"See, *Archer* likes how you smell," I told him.

He grunted in displeasure but silently conceded the point, dismounting as the Named in question turned to look at me.

"What was that supposed to mean?" she said.

"You live in the woods and I've only ever seen you wear one outfit," I replied frankly.

"You could see me *out* of it, if you asked nicely," she winked.

"We've been over this before," I said, dismounting and handing off the reins to a servant.

"Sadly," Archer sighed, doing the same.

We made our way inside, pausing as we passed the threshold. There was no sound. In a city there was always noise in the background, people talking or working or the hundreds of different that kept it all going. Even out on the field, you heard animals or wind or the gurgle of water. Here there was only silence so absolute the sound of my breath felt like someone screaming. The Still Courtyard, huh. That would take some getting used to. Ahead of us

the footsteps of the servant leading us to our chambers were soundless, and the entire thing made me uncomfortable enough I felt the need to keep talking.

"So what's with your 'hitting on everything that moves' habit," I said. "You realize that even if you showed up naked in Masego's bed he'd be more likely to ask how you got your scars than anything else, right?"

"Nah, I just like fucking with him," she admitted with a grin. "He gets so confused and offended."

"I don't," I said, "and you keep offering."

"Twice isn't exactly a lot," she said, rolling her eyes. "Still, let me put it this way. How long do you think you'll live, Squire?"

"I'm a villain," I said. "So theoretically forever."

"I didn't ask for the Evil manifesto," she said. "We've had villains in Refuge, I know the speeches. What do *you* think."

I shrugged.

"If I make it through the next few years, maybe another twenty after that?" I guessed. "Depends on the opposition I end up getting."

"We never have a guarantee we'll make it through the first story," Archer said quietly looking ahead. "Named have more of everything – power most of all, but also danger. I could die tomorrow or in ten years, but sooner or later I get an ending. And when I do, I want to have lived as much as I could."

I could see where she was coming from, honestly. There were a lot of perks that came from being Named, even if I hadn't partaken in most of them. Got that as much from my own sober inclinations than Black's outright austere example, I figured. You only needed to crack open a history book to see a lot of Black Knights and Warlocks had sown their wild oats with enthusiasm. Hells, Masego's father was married to an *incubus*. Dread Emperors and Empresses outright had a seraglio, even if Aisha kept assuring me sex wasn't a large part of that. As for heroes, well, good-looking and righteous was a pretty common type for a lot of people on Calernia. If anything heroes were more likely to end up in bed with another hero than villains were with other villains. I was hardly chaste myself, but sleeping around had never appealed to me past my initial fumbling attempts to learn what I liked. What I had with Kilian mattered to me as more because I could trust her than because she was delightful in bed. Trust was a lot more precious to me than sex these days.



"You're actually quite prudish for a Callowan," Archer said.  
"Your people are a lot more salt-of-the-earth as a rule."

"I wouldn't use Hunter as a measure for Callowan mores," I snorted. "That outfit was a little bare by anyone's standards."

"Those leather pants, though," Archer sighed fondly. "He had an ass like you wouldn't believe."

I wasn't exactly eager to discuss the merits of the buttocks of a man whose hand I had hacked off after beating him savagely, so I wisely decided to go into my rooms when the servant showed them to me. The ochre-skinned girl took the hint, following another servant to her own. My guide was the steward from earlier, and before I could even take a look around she knelt at my feet.

"Hallowed One," she said, looking down. "An invitation awaited you when you arrived at the Courtyard. May I give it to you?"

I was genuinely tempted to say no and see what came of that, but kicking the hornets' nest could wait until I'd had a bath.

"Sure," I said. "It was sent specifically for me?"

"An invitation is always sent to the Courtyard, Hallowed One," the steward said hesitantly. "It's simply that usually we... do not receive guests, in this part of the season."

And just like that today's game of *this does not feel like a coincidence in the slightest* had found a winner. Eyes still on the ground, the fae offered me a scroll with a seal of frost on it. It would have looked natural if not for the emblem that could be glimpsed in the ice. What the emblem actually depicted I had a hard time understanding, the image blurring under my eyes and the words *Duke of Violent Squalls* coming to the front of my mind whatever I did. Fancy.

"There's a bath adjoining the room?" I asked.

"Whatever you require will be found," the steward said.

Close enough to a yes, I figured.

"That'll be all, then," I said.

Time for a bit of light reading, I supposed.

## Chapter 10: Entrance

"No one ever won a war by being shy."  
– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

The door didn't make a sound as it closed. I was in a pretty little antechamber decorated in shades of wood, leading into a large bedroom. I eyed the featherbed with untoward intentions, noting it was twice as large as my own in Marchford. Silk covers and enough pillows for three people: this was exactly the kind of staggering decadence I'd been promised when I'd hitched my wagon to the Evil horse. Instead I had to deal with goblins who couldn't keep their knives in their pants, half the Empire out for my blood and a demesne whose ledger ran so red it looked like it was bleeding. All of which I had to handle while sleeping in woollen sheets, to add insult to injury. There had to be someone I could lodge a complaint with. Hells, maybe that could be the first thing I ever prayed to the Gods Below about – *how about some grapes and oiled up manservants, you stingy fucks?*

With a snort I unbuckled my belt and sheath, tossed them on the covers. Normally getting out of my plate was a job best fit for two, but I'd been stabbed enough today it had gotten a great deal easier. I got rid of the greaves first, then the gauntlets and then fiddled with the breastplate and pauldrons for a while. By the end of it I had a lovely little pile of goblin steel full of murder holes on the ground, and with a sigh of pleasure I got rid of my armoured boots. The smell was ripe, so I tossed them as far away as I could. Being Named got me out of many of the little ugly details of life – didn't get sick anymore, tired much slower and I hadn't had my monthlies in about two years – but it did nothing for sweat. Or what the inside of a boot smelled like after a hard day of fighting.

The aketon I placed on the bed, leaving me in only a pair of heavy cloth trousers and able to breathe comfortably for the first time in what felt like forever. I passed a hand through my hair, tugging off the leather ring keeping it in a ponytail. I grimaced at the sensation of sweat long gone cold, then forced myself to get up instead of just dropping on the silk to lie there like some sort of moaning spineless mollusc. There was an archway into a side room to the left, so I picked up the invitation scroll and padded that way. Strange how even this far into a land of ice I barely felt the cold: I was fairly sure that wasn't my Name at work. Who knew, maybe even fairies got gold. To my pleasure I found a low bath set in a quaint little square of stone, already drawn. The water was limpid, almost impossibly so.

It also did not seem to be warm.

I got closer and dipped a toe inside, flinching at the wintry temperature. Yet after the moment the cold started to feel refreshing. Purifying, almost. Huh. Well, it wasn't like I had alternatives. I placed the scroll by the edge and got rid of my trousers, gritting my teeth before sliding into the bath all at once. The sudden cold was overwhelming for the first few heartbeats but when I got used to it the sensation from earlier

returned. It was rather calming, really. I ducked under the surface to rinse my face and hair, shaking underneath before coming back up close to the side. Carefully I broke the seal on the scroll having shaking my hands off the worst of the droplets, watching the frost dissipate. Inside was an invitation, like the steward had stated. Not directed at me specifically, I noted, but at whoever was in the Still Courtyard.

Whoever that usually was, they were pretty far up the food chain. The language was both elaborate and ingratiatingly polite – and given that it was the Duke of Violent Squalls who'd sent this, that probably meant this was for royalty. Or not, I frowned, reading the lines again. No mention of royal title was made, but some of the phrasing implied the receiver was *foreign*. Regardless, it was an invitation to a ball held in the Duke's palace in the city, after nightfall. A masquerade to boot, because evidently I'd stepped into a shady Proceran romance. At least Hakram would be at home, I thought with a grin. He had like three of those stashed under his bunk. The one I'd thumbed through involved a lot of corsets being manfully ripped off and longings sighs all around. It was a sign of my deep love for the orc that I hadn't told Robber about my find.

I set the scroll aside and leaned against the side of the bath, closing my eyes with a sigh. The Winter King, I decided, would have more than one place to stash guests until he could receive them. It was not a coincidence we'd been sent to the one where there would be a vaguely addressed invitation waiting for us. We – I – had been meant to get this. More than that, the way I'd lied through my teeth to get us into Skade had either been expected or was something the quasi-god ruling this place intended to use. For his advantage, probably. That was usually the way it went. What in all the Hells the ruler of half of faekind would want with a Squire from the Dread Empire was where I was drawing a blank. The Winter Court had staked a claim on Marchford, sure, but I was beginning to grasp it was more complicated than that. For one, if a noble of the calibre of the Lady of Cracking Ice had stepped into my city there would be corpses from wall to wall.

Instead we'd gotten a few of their soldiers, a single group of riders and a bunch of aristocrats that must have been hilariously low down the pecking order for them to be taken out by mere legionaries. I didn't mean to sell the Fifteenth short: there weren't a lot of forces in the Empire or out of it I wouldn't pit them against. They were highly skilled professional soldiers led by the most talented tactician I'd ever met, with the core of their troops blooded against devils and heavy cavalry. They were not, however, equipped to stand against a host of demigods who could warp the landscape with an idle thought. No, if the Winter King had been serious about getting a foothold in Marchford right now he'd have one. Actually taking the city, then, had not been

his objective. *If you know the means and the results, you can grasp your enemy's intent*, Black had taught me.

The attacks had been the means. The results were that I'd sallied out to fight the fae, by necessity stepping into Arcadia to shut down the door on their fingers. There was a distinct possibility, then, that getting me here – whether that was Arcadia in general or Skade I could only guess – had been the entire point of that affair. I took a moment to master my rage at the thought. I had no way of knowing how many casualties we'd taken on the second attack, but the number would not be small. My soldiers, killed just to get my attention. I breathed in and out until I could think beyond *murdering my way through everyone responsible for that*. All right. We'd been pushed towards Skade by the Winter King, and after getting there had been directed to the Still Courtyard. I was willing, for now, to assume that had been the plan. I'd been neatly guided to the city, every step thinking I was bluffing my way out.

At the Courtyard we'd found an invitation waiting for us, meant for someone of high rank but perhaps not of the Winter Court. I was pretty sure mortals didn't usually come this deep into Arcadia unless they were as ragingly insane as the Lady of the Lake, so odds were this invitation was for another fae. That meant the Summer Court, and wasn't that just another kettle of equally murderous fish? The Courts were meant to be at war, I knew, but somehow they were not. Summer was out there making someone regret their decisions and Winter was puttering about in my backyard – yet even with that difference from the norm, the stories were unfolding. Like they had in the marketplace, everyone going through the motions and always leading to the same outcome.

"He wants us to play someone else's role," I spoke into the empty room.

We'd been summoned to fill the shoes of some Summer fae, inserted into a story we didn't know the plot of. *Why?* And that was the question, wasn't it? Two people out there were playing shatranj on a board I didn't know about, and once more I was a pawn. I wouldn't be finding any answers in a bath, though, so it was time to go. I hoisted myself out, reaching for the cloth set aside on a bench to dry myself. I raised an eyebrow when I saw my trousers had disappeared, setting the cloth on my shoulder and heading for the bedroom. My armour was gone as well, I saw, as was everything but my sword belt and cape. Neatly placed on the bed was a dress of green brocade with accents of gold thread, along with an ornate fox mask of gold with green accents.

I tried on the dress as much out of curiosity as because I wouldn't be going out naked in the corridors to ask for my plate back. It fit perfectly: sleeveless, high-collared and going down

to my ankles, it was the single most comfortable thing I'd ever worn. A looking glass made of ice to the side told me the cut was hinting at my having cleavage in a way that was slightly less than honest. I could move easily in it, though bending over was tricky – still, no more than it would have been with armour on.

"Well, it wouldn't do to show up at a masquerade in plate," I murmured.

I buckled my belt around my hip, adjusting so my sword would be easy to draw. Looking for something to replace my boots I found exquisite crystal slippers. *Not happening*, I snorted. Those would be impossible to fight in. The pair of supple leather boots by them was more to my taste, as were the green silk thigh-high stockings inside them. Hadn't worn anything this nice since I'd gone dancing with Kilian in Laure, I thought, and decided I was definitely stealing all of that when I bailed out of Arcadia. The cloak settled comfortably around my shoulder, Hakram's handiwork of striped banners flourishing behind me as I turned to pick up the mask. I left the room to look for the others, blinking when I saw out the window that night had already fallen. How long had I been in that bath? *Stupid question, Catherine. Like time means anything here: Could have been in there just long enough to dip your toe and it'd still be dark out.*

Archer's rooms had been just further down the hall so I checked there first, but the door was open and no one was in. I wandered a bit before running into a servant, who after the obligatory kneeling and abject submission guided to me to the library – I was apparently the last out and all the others had gone to Masego. Library, as I found out, was something of a misnomer. Though the walls were covered with stacks filled with volumes, the amount of plush chairs and tables made it clear this was meant to be a room where people were received. Small orbs of fairy flame floating like chandeliers lit up the place with a subtle blue tint. Apprentice was easily found: he was alone on his chair, an orb floating right above his head as he paged through a manuscript. Two piles of volumes flanked him and he paid no attention whatsoever to the others.

This was the first time I'd ever gotten a good look at Archer, so I paid close attention. My guess that she was stacked underneath the layers seemed to have been right on the nose: her grey vest and white shirt curved noticeably. Over it she wore a long woollen coat of darker grey, embroidered with gold patterns along the border that matched the exact shade of the gold on my dress. Long grey trousers ending in soft leather shoes, her neck covered by a carelessly arranged silk scarf matching the coat. I could see the handle of her longknives peeking out, but of the bow there was no trace. She had a thinner face than I would have thought, and a remarkably slender nose. Hazelnut eyes met mine,

going up and down my dress with a grin. Yeah, I'd seen that one coming.

I almost laughed when I saw Hakram. He wore a dark velour doublet and matching trousers that made it clear exactly how broad his shoulders were, but the amusing part was the cape: black fur with pure white bordering, it made him look like Creation's fanciest warlord. The axe – not his own, it had been broken earlier this one was too silvery to be his after repair – hanging off a leather ring at his belt lent him a slightly more martial appearance, as did the thick leather boots. The skeletal fingers that had seen him called Deadhand by his own peeked over the edge of his sleeve, unnaturally still.

"There were golden earrings and white war paint," he said in an aggrieved tone. "*War paint*, Cat. What is this, the War of Chains? No one's used that in centuries."

"I'm sure you'd make for a very costly hour at a brothel," I reassured him.

He groaned and covered his eyes.

"I always did wonder if orcs have the same... machinery down there as we do," Archer said with a shit-eating grin.

"We're not having the 'what do orc genitals look like' talk," Hakram replied firmly.

"I have a book, I'll loan it to you," I told Archer.

She raised a perfect eyebrow.

"Got curious," I shrugged. "And he gets all irritable when asked about it."

"Masego never changed," Adjutant said, desperately changing the subject.

We all turned towards Apprentice, who was still reading.

"I think he's under a silencing ward," I said with a frown.

I took out the the invitation scroll and tossed it at the dark-skinned mage's head. It hit him right in the glasses and he nearly jumped out of his skin, dropping the book and hastily dispersing the spell around him.

"Oh, is it time to leave yet?" he asked.

"My guess is that will be whenever we decide to go," I said, "but we've got places to be. Go get ready."

That got some attention from the others.

"The invitation?" Archer asked.

"We're going to a masquerade," I said. "To find out exactly who we're supposed to be."

"That seems counterproductive," Masego pointed out. "We'd be wearing masks."

I wasn't sure if I was just terrible at the vague-but-meaningful announcements or Apprentice was that much of a pain, but clearly my technique needed work.

"Did you notice how we're all wearing different clothes, Masego?" I said.

He paused, pushed up his spectacles.

"Yes," he lied.

Archer coughed into her hand, failing to disguise her laughter.

"I'm guessing there's a fancy outfit in your rooms," I patiently told Apprentice. "Go put it on."

"My robes are clean, if that's what you're worried about," he said. "There's a self-cleaning enchantment on them."

So *that* was why he never used the Fifteenth's laundry chains. I'd always assumed he had some poor – literal – devil handling it.

"We also have masks," I said, bringing up my own.

I glanced at the others, who didn't seem to have their own, and Hakram gestured a table in the back. Theirs were there: a black obsidian bear for Adjutant, and a gold-and-grey falcon for Archer. Apprentice snapped his wrist, whispering a word in the mage tongue, and a thin blank carnival mask of ice formed over his face. It accommodated his spectacles perfectly, at least.

"Fine," I said, "have it your way. But don't come complaining to me if the fae make fun of you."

"Do I *have* to talk with them?" he asked very seriously. "I'm not even close to finished with these."

He rapped his knuckle atop the pile of books to his left to clarify. I bet the Lone Swordsman never had to deal with shit like this, I thought irritably. Killing him had been an act of justice just for that.

"You can bring one," I said. "And only read when someone's not verbally trying to entrap us into something lethal."

He muttered under his breath. His fathers had spoiled him, I thought. I didn't want to make assumptions here, but I was betting on the incubus for the worst of it. He was probably a soft touch when it came to discipline. The matron at the orphanage always spanked us if we made noise after lights out, now *that* was a firm hand. I took back the invitation and adjusted my cloak.

"All right, you sad excuse for a band of minions," I said. "Gird your loins, we're going on a magical adventure."

Archer clapped, painfully slowly.

"I'm guessing the speeches aren't why they put you in charge," she said.

"Last time we went on an adventure I ripped out someone's soul," Apprentice said. "Do I get to keep it this time if we do it again?"

"Hakram?" I asked despairingly.

"Have you seen how tight those trousers are?" he grunted. "Doesn't get more girded than that."

If we all got killed, I better go last. I felt like I'd earned it.

—

There'd been a carriage waiting for us outside the Courtyard. Four white horses and a coachman who'd bowed to us as we claimed the seats inside. I'd gotten Hakram on my side, making the tactical decision to sacrifice Masego behind if Archer got grabby. I peered out the window, watching Skade in the light of ever-present fairy lights. I didn't recognize any of the streets we went through from earlier, though that didn't mean much. The night sky above us was just as confusing: now and then I got a glimpse of the stars they way they looked above Callow, but most of the time they were entirely foreign constellations. The way they kept changing between every look probably didn't help. We were quiet on the way to the duke's palace, only stirring when we began to hear music in the distance.

A beautiful voice was singing, though I couldn't make out the words yet, accompanied by what seemed like a set of string instruments. The carriage eventually slowed and I waited patiently until servants came to open the doors for us. I stepped down onto a woven blue carpet leading to a set of stairs, moving aside to make room for the others as I stared at the Duke of Violent Squalls' palace. Gods Below, it was made of *wind*. Walls and stairs and columns, sculpted out of every stirring wind that looked like a physical thing. Boreal lights shone like lamps and



I could see more of them inside, in a grand hall. A servant attempted to take my cloak and I waved him off as the others caught up to me.

"Stable and self-sustaining," Apprentice murmured. "Interesting. I don't think it could be reproduced outside Arcadia, but the underlying principles..."

"Think about that after we've made it through the night," Adjutant said.

Archer finished adjusting her falcon mask over her face and gallantly offered me her arm. I rolled my eyes and strode forward. Servants parted for us, bowing low, until we reached the summit of the steps. There a man with spectacles was holding an unrolled scroll in his arms, discreetly peering at us through the glass. An announcer. *So much for the masks hiding identities.* I slowed in front of him and he began to speak, then closed his mouth. He looked panicked for a few heartbeats before clearing his throat.

"Lady Catherine Foundling of Marchford, the Squire," he announced.

I looked at him, then suddenly ripped the scroll out of his hands. I ignored his protests and scanned through the list of names until I found where he'd been looking at. Four names, the most important of which was the first: *Princess Sulia of High Noon, envoy for the Summer Court.* I gave him back his list.

"Fuck," I said feelingly.

Archer was announced as 'Lady Archer of Refuge, first pupil of the Darkest Night', before catching up to me.

"What do you know about how wars start between Winter and Summer?" I asked her.

"They have several reasons, never use the same twice," she replied.

Behind us Hakram was announced as 'Lord Adjutant of the Fifteenth, the Deadhand'.

"Is one of them some princess called Sulia getting her ass killed at truce talks?" I asked.

The other Named frowned.

"That rings a bell," she said. "But I think she gets captured. Trap?"

"Isn't it always?" I grunted.

Masego joined us after his introduction of 'Lord Apprentice of the Wasteland, Son of the Red Skies'. We all clustered at the threshold of the entrance hall for a moment.

"Problem?" Hakram said.

"We've taken the place of diplomatic envoys from Summer in a story," I whispered.

"That doesn't sound good," Apprentice said. "I suppose it's a good thing we have you along."

I glanced at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're very good at murdering our opposition," he said, genuinely believing he was giving me a compliment.

I occasionally forgot Masego had been raised by villains. For him that probably counted as praise.

"You don't know for sure I'm going to kill someone," I said.

"Not gonna lie, I'll be disappointed if we don't," Archer noted.

"I've done diplomacy before," I continued.

"I don't think extorting the High Lords counts," Apprentice said.

"Or looting that angel," Hakram added.

"I think bullied might be more accurate," Masego said.

"If you guys keep this up I can *guarantee* you someone's getting killed," I said.

"That's the spirit," Apprentice said, patting my shoulders. "Now let's move along, Catherine, we're blocking the way. You really need to pay more attention to your surroundings."

He strode into the hall before I could come up with a reply, still gaping. The others followed, Archer turning back only long enough to give me a mocking grin.

## Chapter 11: Swerve

*"Only if it's 'being executed'."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, upon being asked for a last request by a hero

There were hundred of fae inside, each more glittering than the last. I'd seen the court of Praes and the opulence of its nobles,

but this was a *Court*. That capitalized letter mattered. These immortal creatures had been at this game since the Empire was nothing but a madwoman's dream and the difference showed. We'd gone through the duke's antechamber and entered what must be the reception hall, keeping together as we did. Hakram being at my left had a reassuring weight, like having a shield. Our entrance had made a stir but we weren't immediately approached: all we got was a myriad of discreet looks as fae murmured over their drinks. Archer took wine from a tray of silver cups, ignoring my disapproving look as she tasted the glittering liquid and hummed in approbation.

"Good stuff," she said.

"Don't get drunk," I warned.

"You know the poison trick works for flushing out liquor, right?" she said.

"And if this was wine from Creation I would have kept my mouth shut," I said. "It isn't."

"Eh," she shrugged.

And on that bit of stunning eloquence we silently agreed to let the matter go for now. Given that I'd seen her guzzling down hard liquor instead of tea for breakfast last year, I was willing to bet on Archer being able to hold her drink better than most. Anyway, I had more pressing cats to skin than trying to make a sober woman out of this one. The reception hall had half a dozen interwoven stories of the same wind-material this entire place was made of, all centred around the ballroom floor in the middle of the ground level. Which was, for now, empty. Or almost – I'd finally found where the music came from. There were seven fae on a podium against the wall, most of them playing instrument but a single one singing the words I still couldn't make out even this close. Magical shenanigans, I assumed. The melody was sad and I could hazard a good guess as to why: all of them were clapped in silvery chains and looked like they'd gone a few rounds with an Imperial interrogator. And not one of the nice ones.

"Those aren't Winter fae," Hakram said, watching the same people.

They were most definitely not, I grimly thought. Their clothes were in tones that matched the décor but they themselves stood out. There was a warmth to their being that all the other fae around them lacked, a softness to their silhouettes: to my senses they felt like candlelight while the guests felt like ice. *Summer Court prisoners*. I was beginning to glimpse a shape here. I was in the shoes of a Summer princess, likely part of a diplomatic mission of some sort. After coming to a masquerade thrown by a duke, I would then run into some of my fellow Summer fairies who'd been forced into servitude and cruelly beaten. Someone was

trying to goad me – the role I was in – into doing something unwise. Interesting that the princess would be expected to save them, though. Summer wasn't as prone to tormenting mortals in the stories as Winter, but they weren't exactly paragons of kindness either.

"That's where we're expected to go," I murmured. "So let's go elsewhere. Any of you know anything about mingling with aristocrats?"

"Smile and pretend you're listening," Masego said absent-mindedly. "If there's a lull in the conversation say *how interesting* with a mysterious look."

"So that's a no," Archer said amusedly.

Well, she wasn't wrong. I took the lead and went to the left. The others followed. Entering one of the side galleries seemed to have been an unspoken signal that we were fair game for conversation: all the guests who'd been keeping their distance began approaching. I wasn't the only target, it swiftly became clear. Or even the first one. Some green-haired woman with eyes that looked like jewels struck up a conversation with Masego about magic and I gave it up as a lost cause the moment the words "partitioned stable matrix" were spoken. As far as temptations went that was one was mostly harmless, so I left him to it. Archer was approached by tall grinning dark-haired twins – of different genders, I thought, but it was hard to tell which was which – bearing bottles of liquor that looked harder than wine. *They're tailoring themselves to what we want*, I thought.

"Lord Hakram, I believe?" an older fae coughed out. "You have the looks of an orc from the Howling Wolves, if I may be so bold."

Adjutant raised an eyebrow.

"I am," he gravelled.

"How nostalgic," the noble smiled gently. "It has been ages since I've encountered one of your kind. I had the pleasure to visit the Antlered Field when the one called Kharsum became Warlord."

The tall orc leaned forward unconsciously.

"You saw the election of the Unifier?" he asked.

"Oh yes," the fae said. "Always a lively affair, orc statecraft. I've watched battlefields littered with fewer dead."

I'd been wondering what take they would use with Hakram. Orc history made sense. His people had lost so much knowledge since the War of Chains and the occupation that followed. Every bit of lore from back then was worth more than gold to his people,

another piece of stone to add to a mosaic that was still more bare than filled. He glanced at me and I nodded. Sticking together wasn't making us any gains at the moment, we'd have to wait and see what the flow of the story was. I was rather curious what angle they'd assail me with, truth be told. Unless they could find me a practical way to turn the Imperial governorship system into a functioning nation-state, they didn't have much to distract me with. The answer came in the form of the Baron of Blue Lights – one of the nobles who'd escorted me into the city – strolling casually in my direction. When we'd last met he'd been wary but interested. Now he looked at me with open hatred.

"Antagonist, are you?" I said with a smile before he could get a word in.

He blinked, face going entirely blank for a moment. Like his entire being had shut down. *You lot don't like it when I don't speak my lines, do you?* I'd found my first lever to pull. Wouldn't get me through this mess, but it was something I could use.

"Do you enjoy the singing, my lady?" he said after a moment, defaulting back to sneering.

I'd seen Heiress pull better sneers than that, I thought with amusement. He wasn't even silently finding the very concept of my existence distasteful. Second-rate performance.

"Not one much for music," I said. "Also beating the performers seems in poor taste, but that's just a personal preference."

"Captives have no rights," he said.

"I mean you guys haven't signed any of the Calernian treaties about prisoner treatment, so I guess you're factually correct," I mused. "Not that the Empire has either, mind you. The whole blood sacrifice thing would be a breach of terms I imagine."

The Baron seemed completely at a loss as to where to go from there.

"They will all be whipped if one misses a note," he tried.

"That's nice," I said. "Does everyone take a turn, or is it just the one torturer? Never whipped anyone before so I don't want to make a fool of myself in public."

I wondered what it said about me that I was beginning to enjoy myself. Obviously there'd been an assumption here that on moral grounds I would object to the Summer fairies being chained up and tormented. Swing and a miss, that. Not only were those musicians essentially immortal creatures that would come around again next time Summer happened, but they were also not mine to protect. Now

if it had been members of the Fifteenth or Callowans on that stage, he'd be choking on steel right now. My motivation to save fae from fae, though, was effectively nil. I'd been taught the hard way, after all, that if you tried to save everyone you only ended up getting more people killed. I wasn't unfamiliar with hard choices and this... simply did not qualify. I wasn't risking my life or the life of my friends for ultimately meaningless fairy schemes. *Villain, Baron, not hero. I get to pick my fights.*

I patted the Baron of Blue Lights on the shoulder and left him blank-faced behind me. I idly wondered whether my refusing to bite I had killed the trap entirely, or if I'd merely survived the first volley. Probably the second one: my luck was the stuff weeping despair was made of. And just to confirm that shining sliver of pessimism, lounging by a pillar I saw the Prince of Nightfall eyeing me wryly. I grimaced. This one wouldn't be as easy to fuck with.

"Enjoying the masquerade, Lady of Marchford?" he said.

Predictably, the man's mask was a raven. I got the less than reassuring feeling that it was watching me independently of the wearer's eyes. I leaned against the railing by his side, watching the empty ballroom below.

"It's been enlightening," I replied. "Pretty obvious trap, for entities supposedly cunning made flesh."

"A well-laid trap does not rely on surprise but on the opponent's nature," he said.

A servant with a plate approached us. There were two pipes on it, both already lit: one smelled sweet and musky, and the Prince grabbed it. Ground poppy, if I was not mistaken. The other had the distinct sharp tang of wakeleaf, a personal vice of mine.

"Is it poisoned?" I asked the dark-haired fae.

"If I ever decide I want your life," the Prince said, "poison will play no part in your death."

"That's not a no," I noted.

"It is not poisoned," he sighed.

I took the pipe. Would be a shame to waste the stuff, especially when I could so rarely afford it these days. Ashur had raised all its prices on the merchandise imported by Praes after war blew up in the Free Cities, and the island was the only place where it was grown. I inhaled with a little sigh of pleasure and blew out the grey smoke.

"Your King picked wrong when he baited me into coming here," I said. "Whatever it is you're after, you're not going to get it."

"That's the beauty of it, Lady Foundling," he smiled, face framed by a cloud of poppy. "What we want is what you want. Our victories are one and the same."

So the Prince was in on whatever his boss was up to. Good to know. I wasn't deluded enough to think my idle talk had been enough to trick the man into revealing that, so the implication was that the Prince believed it *didn't matter* if I knew.

"Where's Princess Sulia, right now?" I asked suddenly.

He chuckled.

"Setting fire to the south of your little kingdom," he said. "Even for one of us, the Princess of High Noon has a beautifully simplistic view of things."

I inhaled again, let the wakeleaf warm my blood and sharpen my wits. The idea of an entity with the same kind of power I could feel emanating from the Prince being loose in Callow was horrifying beyond words, but I could not flinch now. I might never get another occasion half as good to gather information.

"Now I get that you think you can mess with *me*," I said. "I'm just a wet-behind the ears Named with a single aspect."

The Prince of Nightfall blew a ring of smoke, raising an eyebrow.

"While my role has little to do with intrigue, that is an exceedingly poor lie," he said.

I kept my face calm. Could he really tell? Masego would know, but he also knew better than to say anything. I'd learned from the fights of the Liesse Rebellion that aspects were trump cards to be used sparingly and best kept hidden – the Lone Swordsman had known about Struggle before our second fight and used it against me, which he wouldn't have been able to if I'd kept it quiet. I'd taken in the lesson and kept what I'd gotten in the aftermath of the Battle of Liesse close to my chest, the edge hidden until I could use it to crush Heiress.

"No idea what you're talking about," I lied. "Anyway, like I was saying, messing with me is one thing. Invading Imperial territory like the Courts have been doing, though? That's another. There's bigger fish in that sea, and you're pissing them off."

"Your Calamities are away," he said. "And even if they were not, their finely crafted defences were not meant for us."

Two things I could take from that, I thought. Either they'd struck Callow now because the Empire's most dangerous villains

were all abroad save for the Empress – who had to stay in Ater – and they expected whatever they were after to be achieved before the Calamities came back. That or they genuinely believed they could take on Praes on its traditional battlefield and win. Of that, I wasn't convinced. When push came to shove there weren't a lot of drastic measures the Dread Empire was above taking to get a win. While in Arcadia the Legions would get wrecked, but on Creation the fae were weaker. And if there was a Calernian nation with the magical know-how to make real trouble for the Courts, it was definitely Praes – or the Kingdom of the Dead, I supposed, but you'd have to be a special kind of stupid to take a crack at that. Entire Crusades had been annihilated without even reaching Keter.

"It's still a bad fight to pick," I said.

Another servant with a plate of pipes came by and the Prince traded his for a fresh one. I glanced at the second hit of wakeleaf.

"Is it poisoned?" I asked again.

"No pipe you will be offered tonight will be poisoned," the dark-haired fae said irritably.

I took the second one. There was a still a bit left at the bottom of my current pipe and the waste broke my heart, but I couldn't know if I'd get another offer.

"The first time I ever stepped into Creation," the Prince of Nightfall told me, pulling at his pipe, "I found it a brutish, ugly thing. A pale imitation of Arcadia painted with lesser pigments. While my fellows rejoiced across the fresh playground, I began to withdraw."

The longer he spoke, the colder I felt. Not the sharp bite of winter, I decided, but more like the cool air that spread after sundown. I tugged my cloak closer around my dress.

"I paused after coming across a fox," he continued with a smile. "It had fallen into a trap laid by one of your ancestors, you see. A snare that caught its foot. It knew it would die, if it remained there."

I frowned.

"It chewed off its foot," I guessed. "The smart ones do that sometimes."

"Yes," the Prince of Nightfall agreed. "And it escaped. An insignificant animal, yet it could do something that would never have occurred to any of us."



Oh Gods did I not like the sound of that.

"You're chewing off your foot right now," I said.

The dark-haired fae blew out a thick stream of smoke ahead of him. He leaned forward suddenly, and right in front of my face clacked his teeth mockingly.

"Our teeth are a great deal sharper than a fox's, Lady of Marchford," he said. "Beware you don't get chewed."

Dropping his pipe onto a servant-held plate that hadn't been there a moment earlier, the Prince of Nightfall sauntered off. I let out a long breath and stilled the trembling in my hands. I took another pull of wakeleaf and closed my eyes. *Hello fear, my old friend. It's been a while, hasn't it?* I spewed out the smoke and opened my eyes to find another fae leaning by my side. Tall, like most of them, and so pale he might as well have been made of snow. He was closer than was strictly proper and his hare mask did not hide the affection in his eyes. I'd seen the first of my antagonists, I thought. Looked like it was time to meet an ally.

"My lady, this is a trap," he murmured softly.

"No kidding," I said.

"The Duke of Violent Squalls means to entrap you," he said. "Soon he'll make a scene to trick you into a wager. You must not rise to his provocations."

I sighed.

"What's your name?" I asked.

His face went blank. I was supposed to know him, then. Which meant the Princess of High Noon had friends in Winter. I glanced at how close he was standing to me. Maybe more than a friend, even. Wasn't that the stirrings of a proper tragedy? Woe was them, love from across opposite sides. Gods Below, even William had known better than that.

"I am Prospin, the Count of the Last Gasp," he said stiffly. "As you well know."

"Tell me about this wager, Prospin," I said.

"My lady, you *can't*," he implored, reaching for my hands. "It would destroy me to lose you."

Oh yeah definitely more than a friend. I took away my hands before he could touch them.

"I'm sure you'll survive," I replied drily. "Now tell me about the godsdamned wager."

"How you toy with my affections," he lamented.

The Princess of High Noon liked them clingy, apparently. Took all kinds.

"In exchange for the freedom of the musicians, the Duke will ask that you wager your voluntary captivity," he said.

"How's the wager settled?" I asked.

"Duels, for you are a creature of war," Prospin said. "He has three champions ready."

Creature of war, huh. I guess we did have that in common, the princess and I.

"Terms of the duel?" I prompted.

"Death or surrender," the Count whispered.

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. I could work with that.

"My lady, they are ready for you," he said. "I beg of you, do not give them what they want."

And there was the truth, wasn't there? They'd been ready for me since the beginning. Every move I'd made since the first attack on Marchford had gotten me deeper into their plan. It was an infuriating feeling, and I got quite enough of that from Black already. Except my teacher wasn't here: there was no safety net under me, no monster looking over my shoulder and smiling at my enemy. If I fell here I'd break more than bones. The thought only refreshed the fear from earlier and that was unacceptable. I would not be cowed. I would not be made their puppet in this eldritch game they were playing. They wanted to push me around? Fine. Now it was my turn, and I was going to *push back*. I'd been drawn into their tempo for too long, and that was how you lost fights. At best I'd manage to crawl away to survive, and that just wasn't enough. Not when I'd have dead soldiers to buried when I returned. They were owed better. If I couldn't solve a problem, well, I could always make it *their* problem.

"Which one is the Duke of Violent Squalls?" I asked.

"My lady-" the Count began, but I had no patience for it.

"Prospin," I said. "You can either tell me, or you can go over this railing before I ask someone else."

The fae's face went blank.

"He's the man by the ballroom floor," he said after a moment. "At the centre of the cluster of nobles."

I glanced down and saw the group he was talking about. The Duke wore a grey doublet with cuffs of wind, same as his palace, and his mask was shaped like a wolf. His cronies were tittering at something he said.

"Thank you," I told the Count absent-mindedly.

I walked away without bothering with any further talk. On my way down I passed by another face I recognized, the Lady of Cracking Ice, and she offered me a nod. I looked at the beautiful white gloves she was wearing and smiled a feral smile as I came closer. By her side was a distinguished-looking man in armour, the sight of whom had me adjusting my thought.

"I need to borrow something for a moment," I told the man, reaching for his gauntlet.

I got it off his hand before he could properly react – it was largely ornamental, held there only by clasps – and got moving before he could protest, throwing a 'thanks' over my shoulder. The Duke of Violent Squalls and his cronies hadn't moved, the man in question with his back turned to me as he replied to another noble's question. I was maybe three feet away from him and he couldn't be bothered to pay attention. Well, that was just asking for it.

I judged the gauntlet's weight, then tossed the chunk of metal as hard as I could into the back of the duke's head.

It hit with a beautiful thunk. The fae yelped and I could feel the gaze of every single person at the masquerade going to us as he turned to face me with rage in his eyes.

"Evening," I said, puffing at the pipe. "Don't think we've been introduced. My name is Catherine Foundling, and I hear you want to throw down. Let's get this going, shall we?"

I blew the acrid smoke in his face for that extra touch and decided, why the Hells not?

"Bitch," I added.

The entire hall was silent as a grave, save for the sound of Archer's belly laugh.

## **Chapter 12: Double Down**

*"It admittedly took me a few years to make my peace with the fact that Lady Foundling's take on diplomacy is essentially to bring a bottle of cheap wine and a sword to the table, then remind the interlocutor that while the wine might be awful it is still*

*arguably better than being stabbed."*

-Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

"You insignificant *insect*," the Duke of Violent Squalls barked.

I smiled pleasantly. So it *could* work. The Duke was addressing me directly instead of the role of the Princess of High Noon, which I needed him to do badly if my plan was going to succeed. Well, plan might have been a little too ambitious of a word. I was following my instincts, which while usually leading me to breaking someone's bones also tended to get me out of corners in more or less one piece. I could not win this if I played out their story, I knew. I would be quite literally fated to lose. Time to drive the cart off the road. Chaos had always been where I thrived, and no people were so ill-equipped to deal with it as the fae.

"That hurt my feelings, it did," I replied, rolling my eyes. "We going stand here trading insults all night, or we going to talk terms?"

"You give me insult in my own home and speak of terms?" the Duke hissed. "I should destroy you where you stand."

I could feel wind starting up in the ballroom, the hem of my cloak stirring with it. There were probably Names that gave you a precise read on how much power an opponent could throw around, but sadly Squire wasn't one of them. All I got was that he was a glacier compared to the icicle of the average fae, not that far beneath the Prince of Nightfall himself. Joy. That was, I mused, the first hint that Duke or not he probably had a large role in the story of the Winter Court. Was the Winter King trying to use me as a catspaw to get rid of an enemy he wasn't allowed to touch? Unlikely, I finally decided. While I was supposed to get into conflict with this one, the dispute was also supposed to be resolved by champions. My hacking his head off wasn't supposed to be in the cards.

"You won't, though," I said. "Because I'm a guest and the lot of you are all about rules. That's a fairly big one, as I understand it."

"You will not be my guest forever," the Duke of Violent Squalls said coldly.

The wind his cuffs were made of turned furious without his visibly doing anything to cause it. I'd need to have a talk with Masego about how having the aristocratic title to something something worked, practically speaking. Might be a way to sever that. Without his magic the fae was just a man in fancy clothes, and I wasn't above stabbing those when it got me what I wanted.

"Somehow I doubt that getting into a pitched battle in the streets of Skade is going to go over too well with your king," I said. "I'm *his* guest too, remember?"

"If you think that makes you untouchable, you are severely mistaken," the fae said.

"You'll still get a slap on the wrist," I smiled. "And I get the feeling that a king's slap around here tends to... leave marks."

Around all us, all the faces of the fae I could see were blank. They just stood there in utter silence, not so much as breathing as they watched it all unfold. It was like standing in a hall full of statues.

"I'm a kind soul, though," I lied. "So I'm offering you a way to seek redress that dodges the issue."

"A formal duel," the Duke said, pale lips stretching to reveal teeth of ivory. "Yes, that would be acceptable. Crushing you under my heel will be most satisfying."

*And now I have you*, I thought. No champions, just the immortal monster and me in a ring. With a little prodding he'd eagerly left behind the story of the Princess of High Noon becoming captive and walked into entirely uncharted territory. I did not pick that word by mistake: there was no map we were following, here. No story. Which meant, I figured, that I could insert my own. *How do you beat someone you can't beat?* I mused, remembering rocky fields in a land that right now felt so very far away. More innocent days, those, when I'd been playing at war instead of waging it. But I had not forgotten the most important lesson I'd learned from the War College: don't win according to the rules, win despite them.

"So all that's left is settling on the wager," I said.

The Duke's lips stretched even further into an ugly rictus.

"If you lose, you will cede me the soul of everyone under your command," he said.

"I'm not under her command, for the record," Archer called out from an upper level.

I gestured rudely in her general direction without bothering to turn.

"Sure," I agreed. "What I want is--"

"Yes, yes," the Duke said, waving his hand dismissively. "The Summer fae can have their freedom."

"Those poor bastards aren't my problem in the slightest," I said with a raised eyebrow.

I tapped my third finger, eyeing his own hand. The piece of jewellery responsible for the seal on the invitation I'd received could be glimpsed there, a ring of white wood set with a flat opal positively reeking of magic.

"Your signet ring," I said. "I want it. I also want to have always had it."

"That is a heavy price for you to demand," the Duke sneered.

"You just asked me for a few thousand souls, jackass," I replied flatly. "Don't whine about trinkets, it's unseemly."

"Your death," he said, "will not be quick."

"I'm hearing a yes," I said. "Anybody else heard a yes?"

"I agree to the terms of this wager," the Duke spoke through gritted teeth. "Since you are so eager to die, let us proceed. Will the ballroom suffice?"

I grinned and wagged my finger.

"I spent all day travelling," I said. "A delicate flower such as myself needs rest before strenuous exercise. You wouldn't be trying to *cheat*, would you?"

I gasped in mock-surprise.

"I thought better of you, Duke," I said solemnly.

"Dawn, then, on the Fields of Wend," the fae replied with a sneer. "My honour will not suffer for a longer delay."

"You should put it out of its misery, if it's suffering that much," I replied, because I had never learned to quit while I was ahead. "Still, I agree to your terms."

I mentally added to my list the need to find out exactly what those Fields were. Sounded like it might be important.

"A spot of entertainment before Court," the Duke of Violent Squalls smiled. "How refreshing."

I would have cast aspersions on a place that counted blood sport as entertainment, but considering I'd made more coin in Laure from the Pit than the Rat's Nest a saying about stones and glass houses came to mind. Although, frankly, someone who could afford to live in a house made of glass could probably do with a few rocks thrown at them. If *anyone* got that rich there were bound to be a lot of peasants starving in the background. I had nothing

more to gain from continuing the conversation, so I suppressed my urge to get the last word and strolled away. My pipe had gone out, I noticed with a sigh. Typical. Before I made it more than a few feet away all the fae around us started moving again, like a spell had suddenly been lifted. Whispers flared up immediately, but I wasn't intending to stick around and learn what they were. I found Hakram hastily making his way down the stairs without needing to look for long, dragging a protesting Masego along as Archer watched on in amusement.

"Well," Archer said. "That certainly livened up the party."

"Glad I could be of help," I replied sardonically.

"You were *had*," Adjutant gravelled.

I raised an eyebrow. Masego let out a little noise of understanding.

"Everyone under your command," Apprentice said. "Given your position on the Ruling Council of Callow, that could be argued to apply to every soul in the former kingdom as well as the Fifteenth. Oh dear."

I blinked. *Shit*. Hadn't thought of that. I'd been more or less at the head of Callow for a year now, but it had never quite sunk in that I wielded the bastard cousin of a queen's authority. I still thought of myself as Catherine Foundling, the Squire, not anything more.

"He couldn't *really* collect on that, could he?" I said.

"With that large of a debt owed him, the Duke could likely be able to come into Creation in the fullness of his power," Apprentice said. "After that, I have no real notion. It would be unprecedented as far as I know."

"The Calamities would smoke him before it got to that," I frowned. "And Ranger can take the Prince of Nightfall even in Arcadia, she could handle him."

"I'm not sure she would," Archer said. "Depends on her mood at the time. A duke might not be enough of a challenge for her to bother."

"She'd just let a few million people get their souls stolen?" I said, appalled.

"You're the one who just wagered them," Archer pointed out. "The Lady of the Lake is beholden to no one, Foundling. The suggestion that she is would go... poorly."

Huh. I'd always like the stories about Ranger best when I was a kid, but that put them in a different perspective. I passed a hand through my hair.

"I'm not going to lose, regardless," I said. "So it doesn't matter."

"You have a plan," Adjutant said.

"Something like that," I agreed. "Need some time to set it in stone, hence why I delayed. We need to get back to the Still Courtyard."

"Already?" Archer complained.

"Actually, I have an assignment for you that doesn't involve," I said.

"Sounds serious," she said.

"Try to find out anything you can about the Duke of Violent Squalls, while you're drinking yourself to death," I told her. "And I do mean anything you can. Even small details could be useful."

"That seems like something that should have been done before you threw a gauntlet at him," Archer noted. "Though, praise where it's due, funniest thing that happened all night. And I include Adjutant's clothes in this."

"Glad to have you on this team," I said with a sigh. "Masego, on our way out I need you to have a good look at the Duke. Pay close attention to what he looks like."

"I've seen him in my spectacles," Apprentice said. "Anything more is unnecessary."

So those could do more than just see sorcery. That was useful to know.

"Let's go," I said, giving the fae a last glance. "We're wasting daylight – and don't you godsdamned dare to correct me, Masego, it's an idiom."

He scowled all the way back to the carriage.

—

The moment a ward came down to prevent fae from eavesdropping on what would be said inside the library, I turned to my two companions with a winning smile.

"All right, gentlemen, I have work for you," I said.



Apprentice took off his spectacles, laid them on the table.

"I imagine my task has something to do with why you asked me to look at the Duke," he said.

He murmured a few incantations and tapped a finger against the left rim. A wispy image of the the Duke of Violent Squalls formed above the spectacles. With a flick of the wrist, he made it rotate. I leaned forward to have a closer look: I'd stood in front of that very fae, and I couldn't recall that much detail about the clothes he'd worn. I let out a low whistle.

"That's something," I said. "How good are you with illusions?"

"Not my field of specialty, but anything possible with Low Arcana I can achieve," Masego replied casually, as if he hadn't just stated he could match the work of over nine tenths of the mages in Calernia in a fairly difficult branch of sorcery.

"I need you to make me a glamour," I said. "One I can wear."

"Now does not seem the right time for you to develop a sense of vanity," Apprentice said.

"I need you to make me look like I'm related to him," I continued, ignoring the aside.

He hummed.

"I'll need an anchor to inscribe the Working on," he said. "Using anything of Arcadia will make it particularly effective, which should improve the quality of the result."

"Get one of the servants to find you something, then," I said. "A necklace, if possible, one I could wear under my clothes."

He nodded absent-mindedly, clearly already thinking of the logistics of what I'd asked him to do. Masego with a puzzle would not pause to ask me why I wanted to look like I was related to the fae I was going to kill, but I could feel Hakram's eyes on me even as Apprentice rose to his feet and left both the room and the ward behind him.

"The signet ring, that you will 'always have had'," he said. "Looking as if you were a daughter of his blood. These are not coincidences."

"Which leads me to what I want from you. I need you to Find me a story about patricide in one of these books," I said, gesturing at the stacks around us.

Hakram cocked his head to the side.

"Daughter who never knew her parents kills a duke, only then realizing that the signet ring on her hand matches his livery," the orc said. "Fate led her to kill her father. A tragedy, but one that sees the daughter a duchess at the end in a hollow victory."

Ah, Hakram. If I had a hundred people with minds as sharp as his Callow would run itself.

"That's the idea," I agreed softly.

"The part I'm missing is why you would want to be a Duchess of Winter," he said.

"We've gotten in a place where think that what we want out of Skade is to leave it alive," I said, plopping my elbows on the table. "Arcandia, it makes it seem like everything outside is distant. But we entered it for a reason."

"To shut down Winter's invasion of Marchford," Adjutant said.

"Winter can't invade Marchford if Marchford is part of Winter," I murmured.

"That's..." the orc began. "Cat, there's risks. And there will be consequences. As long as you rule the city, it will have ties to a Court that places in Creation usually *don't*. We have no idea what that could mean."

"We have a fucking portal spewing blizzard where my marketplace should be, Hakram," I replied tiredly. "That ship has sailed. The fae are there and they're not going anywhere. If I'm one of their aristocrats, at least I get to make rules in my demesne."

"The Empress will have some things to say about one of her cities also answering to the King of Winter," he gravelled.

"She won't like it," I agreed. "But I think she'd like a slugging match with Winter even less. Praes can't afford that right now, not with Procer lurking at the gate. She's a practical woman, when it comes down to it. You've seen the kind of heavyweights Winter can deploy, if they need to. You really think the Legions can handle that?"

"The Legions of Terror can kill anything in Creation or out of it," Hakram replied without missing a beat.

The ironclad certainty in that voice was a thing to behold. That was something I was only beginning to understand about orcs. I'd once thought that they just separated everything into ally or enemy and that it leant them a certain clarity, but it ran deeper than that. Orcs were slower to come to a belief than humans, but when they did that belief would not waver. Hakram had decided I

was worth following, and that certainty had carried him all the way into a Name. Never mind that no orc had held in in over a millennium. Juniper also believed that the Legions of Terror could take on any opponent, and so she'd crushed mercenaries and devils alike with mere cunning and ruthlessness, playing them every step of the way. They were both exceptional individuals, but I could see a trace of what drove them in all the orcs I knew. I thought of what the Clans would have been like, at the height of their power, and almost shivered. A hundred thousand orcs, knowing deep in their bones that their Warlord could not be beaten. No wonder the Soninke had been terrified of them for centuries, that the Deoraithe had raised a giant wall spanning leagues just to keep them out.

"But casualty rates would be high, until we found the proper method," Adjutant finally conceded.

"Hold on to that thought, Hakram," I said. "When we get back home, I'm pretty sure we'll need to clear out the host of Summer."

"That'll be a fight to remember, when we're old and grey," Adjutant replied, baring his fangs.

In that moment he reminded me acutely of Nauk, and I felt a pang. I missed them, I realized. My little band of misfits. Juniper and Aisha, Ratface and Pickler – and Kilian, most of all. Hells, I missed Black, the man that was so very carefully not-my-father, whose approval I craved as much as I feared it. The sermons at the House of Light had never said Evil would feel like this. Like a family, the only one I'd ever had. Maybe that was how the Gods Below got you, I thought. They made you love people who could do horrible things just enough that you'd forgive them for it.

"Let's make sure we live that long first," I finally said. "The Duke is going to plaster me all over the floor if we don't cheat. Find me my story, Adjutant."

"And then?" the orc asked.

"And then," I smiled, "we're going to bullshit so hard it becomes a prophecy."

## Chapter 13: Forgery

*"The heart of warfare is deception. Therefore, the generals who can deceive even themselves are invincible."*

– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

Researching the old fashioned way would have taken much more than the single night we had. Much, much more: after a while I noticed that every time we took a book from the stacks and looked away,

another one appeared in its place. Hopefully Masego hadn't noticed that, or I'd never be able to convince him to leave. Already telling him that we couldn't loot the library on the way out was going to be a bloody chore, I wasn't eager to fight that battle twice. In the end, we relied on Hakram's aspect to get our results: Find. There was no denying how useful that trick had proved to be since he'd come into it, but I remained wary. That was always the trap, with Names: they gave you an advantage that would enable you to crush all your enemies, if you just... kept leaning into it. And it was always so very tempting to, wasn't it? The more you used it the more effective it became, the stronger the advantage got.

I'd become so used to relying on Learn to, well, learn things that when I'd lost the aspect after Liesse I'd found myself almost crippled. I'd been teaching myself the Old Tongue, the Deoraithe language, before the dust-up with Heiress. When I'd gone back to the books afterwards I'd found to my dismay that I was going to have to start almost from the beginning. The information in my head was incomplete, like I had learned vocabulary lists by rote instead of actually figuring out the language. Almost a year later, I wasn't even even fluent. Back when I'd had Learn, I would have spoken like a native in six months while barely putting any effort into it. Black had been right, as he often was: people who depended on their Names for results fell apart when robbed of those powers. *If you use your Name instead of skill, you never develop the skill.* There was a reason my teacher had taught me swordsmanship the hard way.

That was the axe I had to grind with Find. When Adjutant used it, he found in a matter of hours answers that would normally have taken us weeks. It handed us solutions, and if we ever started to rely on that we'd be *screwed* the first time we ran into a hero that could shut it down. We'd played with the aspect nonetheless, to figure out how it worked, and found it wasn't without limits: the information he looked for had to be at hand and the need for it clear. As far as I could tell, he wasn't warping Creation to get us what we needed. He was using a weaker version of Providence, the golden luck that always had the very thing they needed land in the lap of the heroes at the best possible moment. Masego had theorized that what the aspect actually did was tinker with the odds, essentially making something that could possibly happen much more likely to *actually* happen. Adjutant wouldn't ever be able to point a spot on a map and have that location be full of ancient magical weapons, but he *could* crack open a book at the exact page he needed to read.

I'd worried that the library might not have the story we needed, but the refilling stacks effectively killed the fear. Here in Arcadia, an aspect so subjective in nature was massively more powerful than it would have been in Creation: reality was more fluid in the realm of the fae.

His first attempt found us a story about a shepherd from Summer killing a Duke of Winter in single combat with a sling, winning the battle for Summer. It had a familiar ring to it. It was an old and popular tale in Callow that we'd first gained the Red Flower Vales by a shepherdess killing a Proceran prince with the same weapon when the prince tried to steal her flock. Dead princes always made for fireside favourites, in my experience. Callow had not forgotten the the Proceran betrayal after the Third Crusade. The story was not, however, what we needed. Hakram narrowed his search on the second attempt and found something more to my liking. A boy from Winter becoming a soldier to escape a prophecy he'd kill his own father, only learning too late his mother had had an affair with a Lord of Summer after killing the very same man on the battlefield. That had a shape we could use. It lacked the inheritance, but it stacked the odds in the favour of the long-lost child.

He tried again and found something even closer. A prince of Winter abandoning his own daughter in the wilds for she was fated to kill her father, only for her to be found by a childless prince of Summer and be raised as his own. Killing her birth father on the field, she became a Princess of Winter only to find the horrible fate still dogged her: she was sent as as the champion of Winter to settle a duel, only to find the man who'd raised her to be her opponent. This evidently being a tragedy, she won again and destroyed everything she'd ever loved. Grim, but I could work with that. Stealing bits from both parricidal stories to craft it into a fresh one should do the trick. I leaned back into my seat with a servant-provided cup of wine, Hakram frowning at the pages as he read the third story once more.

"Prophecy's the important part," I said.

"We don't have one," he pointed out.

"So we *make* one," I replied.

"I don't think scribbling 'Catherine murders a duke, gets a duchy' on a parchment will get us anywhere," the tall orc grunted.

"When I fought the Rider of the Host," I said, "he trapped himself into a role. Had to reveal things to me because of it. I think that has long as the fae recognize it's a story, they're bound by it – no matter how obvious a lie it is."

"So we need the fairies to know there's a prophecy, one just good enough to pass as true," he said. "That's... problematic. We'd need that knowledge spread before the fight."

"Apprentice would be able to make a scroll look old and magical," I said. "There's no reason we couldn't make a dozen fake scrolls

and throw them through the windows of high-ranking members of the Court tonight. The Duke himself doesn't have to be warned – ignorance is part of the tragedy.”

“Still feels thin,” Hakram gravelled. “You can make yourself look like his long-lost daughter and it'll help, but we need more.”

“A tragic element,” I said, thinking out loud. “It doesn't have the right weight if I genuinely don't care I just stabbed my ‘father’ to death.”

I sipped at the wine again, wondering at how it tasted exactly the way Vale summer wine did at the peak of summer when served cold, the heavy heat making it the sweetest thing you ever drank. No wonder Archer had kept hitting the bottle.

“I could have Apprentice put the belief in my head that the Duke is actually my father,” I reluctantly said.

Hakram grimaced.

“I like Masego, Cat, and I doubt there's a better mage in the Empire save for Lord Warlock – but messing with memories is always bad business,” he said. “You weren't conscious when he operated on your soul. It... wasn't pretty.”

Mostly I remembered searing pain and a lot of screaming, so I'd take his word for it. Masego had saved my life, that day, but the process had been less than pleasant.

“We'll shelve that, then,” I said. “What else do we have?”

I was an orphan. That was a prerequisite for any of this to be able to work, I thought, but I couldn't make more of it. I was the Squire. That had been my trump card in Liesse, given the roots the Role had in both Praes and Callow, but in Skade there was no ground to gain from it.

“The Winter King brought us here,” Adjutant suddenly said.

I raised an eyebrow.

“So he did,” I agreed.

“Set aside the story for a moment,” the orc said. “We're here because he wants something from you.”

“We don't know what that *is*, though,” I said.

“A hungry warrior will trade his sword for meat,” he quoted in Kharsum.

*If you need something bad enough, you'll take even a terrible deal.* In other words, we had some kind of leverage on the King.

The Prince of Nightfall had compared the Court to a fox gnawing off its own leg — there was desperation in that image, not just viciousness. Pretending we had an immortal winter god's backing when getting into a fight with an immortal winter lesser god felt like fool's gamble, admittedly, but hesitation was the province of the slow and the dead. Fuck it: I'd already faked the king's signature to get into Skade in the first place, after all. If he'd wanted to turn the screws on us for that, we'd already be screaming.

"I have three things," I murmured. "A prophecy, an heirloom and the word of a king. Now *that* has the right weight to it, don't you think?"

Hakram shivered and I smiled.

—

"You look the way bad decisions feel," Archer told me.

It was past midnight when the ochre-skinned girl swaggered into the library, reeking of liquor and throwing herself onto the table in an ungainly sprawl. Masego, who'd been finishing up the eighth fake scroll until she'd put her hand over it, sighed and moved his work to another table. I picked up a book and dropped it on her face as my reply, though even drunk she had the reflexes to snatch it out of the air. Archer wasn't wrong, exactly. After Apprentice had given me the silver chain enchanted with the glamour I'd had a look in the mirror and winced. Kilian pulled off the fae blood, but it could be kindly said that I did not. My features were already sharp and constant fighting had put muscle to my frame, so the exaggeration of both traits with a few fae features thrown in made me look like a pile of harsh angles forced into a person's shape. I did, however, look like I could be related to the Duke of Violent Squalls. That was the part that mattered.

"I'm hoping you have more than insults to give me," I said.

Archer rose to a sitting position with a tired moan, dangling her legs off the edge of the table.

"You picked a fight with a bigwig," she said.

"He's a duke," I said. "That was given."

"He's *the* duke, Foundling," she said. "Look, you know it's not the same king or queen in charge of Winter every time the season comes, right?"

"I'd gathered," I said.

"The role can go to all the fae that are right now princes and princesses," Archer said. "They have different natures, so the story of Summer and Winter can unfold differently according to who has the crown on both sides. That's why sometimes one Court wins and sometimes the other. Outcome's decided the moment the story starts."

"He's not a prince, though," I pointed out.

"He's just as bad," the other Named said. "Whenever you have a Winter ruler trying to avoid the war, he's the one that fucks it up. He's the cornerstone for the war happening anyway."

"So if he threw his masquerade..." Hakram said, trailing off.

"Then the current King is trying to avoid a war," I finished. "The Duke's *important*."

On the bright side, the odds of my getting away with pretending the King of Winter was backing me had just significantly improved: I'd be ridding him of a nuisance.

"So even for a duke he's going to be a bastard and a half to kill," I said.

"That's the word," Archer agreed. "Things I have also learned: man's not married, he's got a bunch of minions on his side and he uses what wind sorcery would be if it was actually useful in a fight."

"Wind sorcery *is* very useful," Masego disagreed without ever looking away from the scroll. "It lacks the offensive abilities of some other elemental spells, but it has few equals when it comes to dictating and restricting enemy movement."

"It *feels* like you're to disagree with me," Archer said, "but your words prove my point."

"It's the basis for scrying, you ignorant thug," Apprentice snapped.

"Ooh, scrying," the woman replied, rolling her eyes. "*That'll* tip the balance in a fight with a Named."

Gods, I missed Juniper. Nobody squabbled this much when she was around to glare. People without strong opinions didn't become Named, I knew, which was why you could never have a band of them in a room without it coming to *some* arguing. It didn't help, though, that Archer's mission in life was to be the piece of gravel in everyone's boot and that Apprentice was exceedingly easy to rub the wrong way.

"This conversation's postponed until we're back in Creation," I ordered. "Archer, I know you have a fascination with asses but



you don't need to be so much of one. Apprentice, you *know* if you let her irritate you she's going to keep pulling your pigtails."

"But she was wrong," Masego muttered mulishly.

Archer hid a grin behind her hand and I moved to change the subject before they could start again.

"Heard anything about the Fields of Wend?" I asked her.

"There's a lake outside the city," she replied. "With shifting glaciers in it. They use it to throw balls sometimes."

Not, I thought, a good battlefield to fight against someone who has a knack for using winds. Not that any place in Winter was, to be honest. Still better than a closed space like the inside of the palace had been, especially since the damned place had been built from the Duke's power.

"Well, that ought to be interesting," I said.

"So now we wait for dawn?" Archer asked. "I might actually die of boredom, Squire."

I glanced at Apprentice.

"How long until you're done with the scrolls, Masego?"

"Give me an hour," he replied absent-mindedly.

"Stay awake, Archer," I said. "I have something for you to do after this."

"Tell me it doesn't involved paying attention to what people are saying again," she implored.

"I want to to break people's windows by throwing lies at them," I replied.

She grinned.

"Sometimes, Foundling, you say the sweetest things."

—

I managed to grab a few hours of sleep afterwards. Enough that I was fresh, anyway. I could have slept longer but my mind was awake so instead I found myself trudging to the courtyard this place was named after. Servants popped up out nowhere, not unexpectedly, and I sat by the edge of the snow with a steaming cup of tea and a pair of sweet apple turnovers. I'd say this for the fae, they cooked better pastries than anything I'd tried back in Creation. By my estimate there was still about a bell left before dawn, so I took my time eating. I heard footsteps behind

me, a sure sign one of my companions was also awake: the fae didn't make noise. Archer plopped herself down, leaning back against a wooden pillar. She had a plate of cold cuts and yet another bottle of wine, I noted with dark amusement. I wasn't sure it was possible to empty the cellars of Winter, but she was certainly giving it a gallant effort.

"Did you even sleep?" I asked.

"Couldn't," she replied. "I'm too curious about what's coming."

I hummed. If all went well she wouldn't need to fight anyway. Besides, even if she'd been up all night she didn't seem tired in the slightest. I wasn't actually in the mood for conversation, so I let silence reign as I drank my tea and nibbled at the pastries. Couldn't muster much of an appetite – never could before a fight, though during I always ended up feeling hungry.

"So what's your deal, exactly?" Archer said suddenly.

I eyed her sceptically.

"My deal?" I repeated.

She scarfed down a piece of meat before replying.

"Every Named has one," she said. "Lady Ranger wants to break anything that thinks it's stronger than her. Your mage wants to open up Creation to see what the gears look like. The orc wants to murder everything in your way."

"And you?" I deflected.

"You already know what my thing is, Foundling," she smiled. "I want to live *large*, so I can die without regrets. You, though? I can't seem to get a read on you."

Funny thing, this. I was more used to being on the other side of the conversation. I'd had one just like this with Hakram, what felt like years ago. Then another with Masego, when I got a glimpse at the detached mania that lay at the centre of him.

"People don't usually ask me that," I said. "Don't need to. I'm pretty straightforward, when it comes down to it. All I want is to dig Callow out of the pit it's in."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Aren't you the Tower's lieutenant there, nowadays? Seems like a done deal."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" I grunted. "I have the reins, within limits. I won. Pit's still there, kingdom's still in it."

Archer eyed me, expression unreadable.

"So that's really all you're after?" she said. "Picking up a half-crown for the land you were born to?"

I smiled mirthlessly.

"Disappointed, are you?" I said.

"You're the heiress to people who changed the face of Calernia," she said, not denying it. "And I don't mean conquering a kingdom – who gives a fuck about where borders are drawn? That comes and goes. When the Lady of the Lake was with the Calamities, they broke a story old as dawn. Just picking up a lesser piece of that is... *small*."

The word was spoken with distaste.

"Last year," I said, "I crushed the skull of a man who thought he was a visionary. He wanted to save Callow, he insisted. Thing is, I don't really believe you can save people anymore. I tried that and it doesn't ever quite seem to work right. I think it's because it doesn't matter, if they worship at the House of Light or sacrifice at some dark altar – most days they're just people, and those are the same everywhere. They till the same fields, pay the same taxes, marry their neighbours and die fat if they're lucky enough."

"Named are more," Archer said. "We're the brighter flame: the people who can actually *change* things."

"Are we?" I smiled. "The part of the Conquest you pay attention to is the Calamities sweeping all opposition aside. You think that's because they were mighty, but that's not the part that matters. They were figureheads, enablers. Praes won because it had grown as a nation while Callow had not."

"The Empire grew because villains *made* it grow," she replied flatly.

"And don't you think it's telling the most successful villains since Triumphant put their efforts into reforming institutions rather than building a bunch of flying fortresses?" I asked. "People won that war, not Named. Malicia and Black, they're brilliant – but there's been a lot of brilliant Named over the centuries, on both sides. What makes those two different is that they know change comes from the bottom, not the top."

"That's..." she hesitated.

Heresy, she wanted to say. That it went against everything we knew. History was forged by the hands of those that stood out and crowned themselves with power, those precious few even the Gods

recognized as apart from the masses. *Except that's a lie. A thousand Dread Emperors and a thousand Kings, but nothing ever changed – until what lay behind them did. It's not the tip of the blade that kills, it's the force that drove it into your belly.* That was, I was beginning to grasp, what I'd done wrong in Callow. I'd fought to put all the authority in my hands with the vague notion that I could fix it all afterwards, but how was that any different from what the Lone Swordsman had been doing? There were people all over the Empire who could make things better, if they were allowed to. And if there were forces trying to stand in the way? Well, I was a villain. The parts of Creation I did not like, I would *break*.

"Right now I have an enemy in Liesse who thinks by sheer will and ruthlessness she'll drag Praes back to a golden age that never existed," I said. "I'm not worried about her, deep down, because even if she claims I'm the one going against the grain *she's* the one fighting the tide."

I broke off a piece of turnover and popped it into my mouth.

"Last spring, a little boy gave an orc a crown of flowers. There's something beyond any of us happening in the Empire, right now," I said. "Malicia and Black think they control it, but I don't think they *do*. They're watching the story when what's important is the people telling it. They want me to part of the machine they're built, but I don't think that's my role."

"Then what is?" Archer asked quietly.

"When heroes and villains come knocking in the name of fate," I spoke, tone calm and measured. "When they try to drag us back to where we were by force with a Choir behind them or the host of some howling Hell – *I'll kill them all*. Every last one of them."

Softly, Archer laughed.

"Ah, Foundling," she murmured. "I was wrong about you – you're not boring at all. You're just as mad as the rest of us."

I looked up at the sky. Night was dying.

"Drink up, Archer," I said. "Dawn's coming and we have a god to rob blind."

## Chapter 14: Trick

*"I can't beat your band of heroes, true, but what if there were another eight bands also out for my blood? Ha! What are you going to do, form a line?"*

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful

I took one look at the Fields of Wend and started cursing in Mthethwa. Lower Miezan just didn't have that register of pure spite the Soninke tongue did. A mile of glaciers lay at my feet, their differing heights and shifting movements filling the air with the sound of fracas every few heartbeats. Named or not, if I got stuck between two of those I'd be a woman-shaped pile of broken bones. I was really hoping the prophecy of lies was going to work out, because if it didn't it was going to take Hakram most of a day to find all the bloody pieces of what was left of my body.

"You got fucked on the arena," Archer noted cheerfully. "And not even in the fun way."

"I'd noticed, thank you," I replied crabily.

The only saving grace of the Fields was that the uneven relief would make it easier to take cover when the Duke of Violent Squalls started throwing a storm and a half at my head. I was very, very glad I'd decided not to wear armour. I wasn't so good a swimmer I'd avoid sinking to the bottom if I slipped. My plate had been repaired by the servants and set out for me, but I'd chosen something lighter instead. Grey trousers went down into the same pair of good boots I'd taken to the masquerade, over them a thick gambeson that went down to my knees. After my last few scraps with the fae I'd learned that my plate served only to slow me down. The sword at my belt rested comfortably, the handle veiled by my usual cloak. I'd gotten little use out of the garment and its supposedly spell-resistant abilities since Black had gifted it to me, but today seemed a good day to bring in an additional precaution.

The four of us had taken the carriage to the duelling grounds and found quite a crowd waiting for us there. More fae were in attendance than there had been at the masquerade, though by the looks of it they were still all aristocrats. Before being a pain in my ass, Archer had taken the time to discreetly point out the handful of fae she'd bombarded with prophecy the night before. At least one of them had the scroll on his person, idly toying with it as he watched us. Would it be enough? I had no idea. Masego's glamour amulet was nestled safely under the gambeson, and I'd been met by a sea of blank faces when I'd arrived, until they all resumed normality. I couldn't know whether that meant they'd bought it, but it was too late to back out now anyway. The crowd parted for us effortlessly until we came to stand by the Duke himself. I eyed him carefully. The bastard was in armour, unlike me. Plate of what seemed like actual silver – though I wasn't enough of a fool to hope the metal would be as soft as it should be – and a cape of blue silk dotted with pale hellebores. He had a falchion at his side, ornately jewelled, but no shield. *Mage, I thought. Free hand needed for spellcasting.*

That was good news of a sort: it meant that he couldn't simply command the winds with a thought. Possibly. Relying on that assumption might just get me killed, so I'd have to fight as if he could until proven otherwise. A fae I'd met before, the Lady of Cracking Ice, smoothly stepped between myself and the Duke.

"Since we've all arrived," she smiled, "we can begin the proceedings. At the invitation of the Duke of Violent Squalls, I will be serving as the officiant witness. Does the Lady of Marchford have any objections?"

"None," I said.

"This is pleasing," she said. "As is custom, I must ask you if the grievance between the two of you can be resolved by any other manner."

"No," the Duke of Violent Squalls spoke carelessly.

"He could kneel at my feet and beg for mercy, then I'll consider it," I suggested.

Wind picked up sharply around us as the fae aristocrat glared hatefully at my face.

"Didn't like that, did you?" I mused. "That'd be a no, then."

"Very well," the Lady of Cracking Ice said, sounding amused. "The terms set by the offended party were death or surrender."

"I withdraw the outcome of surrender," the Duke spat.

"This is quite irregular," the Lady said with a frown.

"I'll allow it," I shrugged. "Didn't intend to let him surrender anyway."

"Since both parties are in agreement, it will be so," the Lady conceded. "Participants are to make their way to the Wending Heart and stand at their respective edge. The duel will begin when the blue light above your heads shatters."

I glanced at the Fields. What she'd called the Heart was easy enough to find: it was the tallest of the glaciers, topped by a perfectly round platform of maybe forty feet in diameter. There was already a shining blue orb hovering over it. I watched the glaciers around, getting a read for the movements: staying on flat ground with someone who controlled the wind was a death sentence. Ranged combat was no specialty of mine, but if I wanted to live long enough to make it to close quarters I'd need some form of cover. Hakram clapped me on the shoulder.

"Wade in their blood, Cat," he said.

"That's the plan," I replied.

I cast a look at the other two.

"If you have to die," Archer said, "die *loud*."

I would have settled for a 'good luck' but that wasn't really her style, was it?

"Get it done quickly," Masego told me. "I've experiments that should not be left unattended for too long."

"Love you too," I mouthed back.

Rolling my shoulder to limber it up, I began my trek to the Wending Heart. Time to find out whether the magical power of lies could kill a man.

—

There was enough snow on the glaciers that the way wasn't too slippery. I was more sure-footed than a mortal had any business being, regardless. Couldn't remember when I'd last tripped or slipped on anything, though even before becoming the Squire I'd not been prone to clumsiness. Probably because I was short, it saddened me to admit. No need to adapt to growing limbs if they stayed the same length.

"It will be most amusing to make a plaything out of an entire kingdom," the Duke spoke as we moved. "No fae has ever possessed such a bounty of souls."

He walked so lightly he didn't leave footprints, I'd noted. It was doubtful I'd be quicker than him, armoured or not.

"You know, I keep hearing about you Winter fae being great at mind games," I said. "But so far? Not impressed. I've had better quality trash talk from orcs and I'm pretty sure that Heiress could make you cry, given half a bell."

We both made the leap to the Heart, his landing admittedly more graceful than mine.

"Why bother with such games?" he said. "You are outmatched beyond your understanding."

"Not the first time I've heard that line," I laughed. "Usually the person speaking it is dead before sundown."

I took the northern edge as he strolled to the southern one. Behind me a lower platform of ice was idly drifting, maybe fifteen feet below. There were a few spires on it that would do nicely as a shield until I could find a good angle to approach. I unsheathed my longsword as he did the same with his falchion,

sneering, and with a loud crack the blue orb above us broke. Before I could so much as blink wind howled, and I was casually tossed off the Heart. For a heartbeat I watched the distant ground under me and, with cold detachment, considered that this wasn't exactly a great start. Even as I began falling I saw a large globe of air forming around me and made the decision that I wasn't sticking around to find out what that would do when completed. My Name flared and I formed a circular pane of shadow under my feet, leaping off it towards another glacier.

I landed rolling in the snow, arrows of wind hitting the ground behind me and spraying ice everywhere. Archer might have undersold the whole wind magic thing a bit, I thought. I cast a look backwards the moment I got back on my feet and saw the Duke was standing at the edge of the Heart where I'd begun the duel. And he was lazily pointing a finger in my direction. Great. I made a run for it. Two glaciers to pick from: what looked like a barren peak of ice or another flat platform below. I picked the platform – better line of sight – but when jumping down found myself hurtling towards a wall of perfectly still air. Ugh. Wind magic was good at restricting movement, Apprentice had said. The understatement trend continued. I hated fighting mages, it was all tricks and no slugging and slugging was what I was best at. I forced myself to twist in the air and landed feet first on the apparently-solid wall, allowing a trickle of power to go down my legs so I could throw myself at the ice peak instead of falling into the waters below.

I hit the ice with a grunt and plunged my sword into it so I wouldn't just start slipping, hanging by a single hand. Another trickle of power into my arms and I spun on myself, tearing out the sword and landing more or less on my feet at the top of the peak – just in time to duck under a sharp-looking sickle of wind. The Duke of Violent Squalls was no longer standing at the edge of the Heart, I saw. That was a mixed bag. On one hand, he no longer had high ground and a good field of vision. On the other, I had no godsdamned idea *where* he was now. I got an answer when the peak under me exploded in a shower of ice and I caught the glint of a moving blade in the spray. *Below, and behind.* The falchion sliced through my cheek, missing a deeper wound only because my footing had quite literally been shattered. I bit down on the hiss of pain and swung blindly at the silhouette of the fae – but he was gone before I could get even vaguely close.

I landed on what remained of the peak with my cloak over my head to shield from the falling ice, managing to vault to another glacier before a wind spear the size of a ballista's bolt tore through the ice under me and collapse the whole thing. Shit. If I got hit by that, I wasn't walking away from it. I kept moving even if I didn't have a precise destination in mind: so far every time I'd slowed for more than a moment I'd been hammered by magic. All right, so this was like fighting an extremely mobile



armoured mage without any need for incantations, who could very likely fly as well and would be unaffected by the terrain. I'd, uh, had better days. *Here's a rule for not dying stupidly*, I remembered Captain telling me. *Never give a mage room to set up. The longer they have, the more dangerous they get.* The few spars I'd had with Masego had only reinforced the notion. If I wanted to avoid further nasty surprises I needed to know where the Duke was.

"Gods Below, this is going to hurt," I muttered.

I climbed to higher ground and crouched, waiting for my enemy to catch up. The first strike I saw coming. A cylinder of wind with ice shards inside formed ahead of me and began spinning ever faster, shooting out a volley of glinting ice spears that tore through the spot I'd been in a moment earlier. The second, though, I did not. The entire glacier I was standing on broke in half and even as I moved to the left side the Duke of Violent Squalls came out of the waters below, like an arrow adorned with translucent blue wings. He was carving his way up with his falchion, now wreathed in a wind version of the weapon that was three times the size of the original. I let the reflexes of my Name take over, stepping back: If I'd been a heartbeat slower, I would have lost an arm. As it was he ripped his way up the side of my body and straight through the clavicle. The wind weapon blew up a moment later, tossing me onto another glacier before I could strike back. I managed to land on my feet, sliding back and blood flowing down the mangled gambeson.

"Rise," I said, the aspect coming to the surface.

I'd gotten what I wanted, but the pain wiped away any notion of smiling at that victory. I'd touched the edge of his cape while he was carving me up, slid a thread of my Name's power into it. A variation on the trick I used with the bone contraptions crafted to trigger goblin munitions, though this had been much more delicate. If I focused I could get a vague sense of where that bit of power was, since it was as much a part of me while away as it had been before. And right now, it was circling around my left. The flesh knitted itself back together as the aspect I'd Taken from the Lone Swordsman did its work, though it pained me that I'd had to use that card this early in the fight. It would be diminishing returns, from now on, and I could only use it another two times. My feet padded against the snow as I focused to keep a read on where the Duke was, astonished by how quickly he was getting around. Just ahead was an ice spire, and in about three heartbeats by my estimation he'd be behind it. I blew out a steamy breath and called on my Name, fashioning a spear of shadows that shattered the spire in a heartbeat.

Let's see how he dealt with being on the *other* side of that. I'd been moving before the spear had even left my fingertips, so I

came out of the mist just as the Duke was turning in my direction. I swung with a grunt of exertion, tip of the blade managing to cut through the tip of his nose as he smoothly leaned back. With a flick of the wrist I reversed the strike, hacking through the edge of his right eye just before our bodies impacted. He screamed in anger as we rolled on the ground. Unlike the fae, I knew how handle myself to come out on top when we slowed. Not much of a scrapper, this one. I slugged him in his bleeding face as I drew back my sword, the sound of my fist crushing the bones of his nose the sweetest of melodies. A burst of wind threw me off him but I managed to have it put me back on my feet, immediately going back on the offense. He swung his falchion without even trying to hit me, the displacement of air caused by the strike magnified until it became a squall that knocked me off my trajectory.

I adjusted my angle without flinching and hacked down at his shoulder. I grimaced before the strike hit: I'd misjudged my strength, that was going to hit plate instead of neck. To my surprise, my blade cut straight into the silver-like metal. I felt flesh give underneath, if not deeply. My sword, unfortunately, was now stuck. His free hand pointed towards my chest and the spear of wind that impacted me a moment later blew me straight off my feet. Along with breaking half my ribs and puncturing a lung, by the feel of it. I managed to keep enough of a grip on my sword that it came with me while my body hit a wall of ice behind me with a dull thud. I coughed out blood, feeling the lung he'd struck beginning to fill already. Hells, that magic hit like a horse.

"Rise," I rasped out.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, I felt the wound beginning to heal. It felt like getting stabbed all over again, Merciless Gods. I managed to push myself back to my feet anyway. The Duke's hand was on his armour, looking appalled. And *scared*, I saw, for the first time since the duel had begun.

"What madness is this?" he barked. "You do not have the power to even begin to touch my armaments."

I wiped the blood off my lips and grinned red.

"Guess it was just meant to be," I said.

Strike one for the power of lies. It wasn't handing me the victory in a handbasket – the fake prophecy hadn't been well-crafted enough for that – but I'd touched the story just enough I could twist it. That there was a *chance* for me to win. The hole in my lung closed, though my ribs still felt like a clan of orcs had been stomping on them. With only one good eye left and a broken, blood nose the Duke had come out ahead but he no longer looked so pristine. With a snarl of rage, he flicked his hand

upwards and I took that as my cue to make a tactical retreat. I jumped atop the wall behind me and legged it to another platform. Good instinct, I saw a moment later. Winds roiled in a circle enveloping the entire width of the glacier then came down like the hand of an angry god – the entire mass broke like glass and sunk under the water, sending waves in every direction that had the glaciers rocking like ships in a storm. The Duke of Violent Squall had not moved, wings keeping him aloft in the air as his eyes searched for me. Deciding that running the Hells away was the better part of valour, I ducked behind an ice spire and continued my escape.

The sliver of power in his cape told me he was on the move a heartbeat later, when I concentrated. Going under the water again, I thought. Running out of tricks, was he? Or perhaps fae weren't *allowed* to be too creative. If they could make too many decisions, their stories might not unfold as they should. I gauged where he came out of the deep and moved to flank him. I felt the Duke pause and smiled. I'd done enough damage the creature was wary now. He seemed to be hiding beneath a glacier's cliff, so I crept quietly atop and only allowed a trickle of power into my legs when it came time to leap, teeth bared and sword high. Another eye, I thought. If I could take its vision away this would become a great deal easier.

I realized I'd fucked up about halfway to the ground.

The Duke of Violent Squalls was not under me, waiting to get stabbed. His cape, however, was. Trap, and I'd literally leapt at the occasion of falling into it. A globe of air, the same magic he'd used early in the fight, formed around me. A heartbeat away from my feet touching the ground the air *solidified*, trapping me like a fly in amber. I stayed there hanging, barely able to breathe, as a spire of ice shimmered and revealed itself to have been the Duke. The snow-pale fae smiled and idly waved his hand, the globe shrinking closet to my body before rising higher in the air, taking me with it.

"Sooner or later," he said, "vermin gets caught. Shall we give them a spectacle worthy of my name, Lady Foundling?"

His wings beat and he took me back to the Heart still in his globe, landing fluidly on the ground as I hung in the air above him. I could feel the fae on the shore watching us, though I couldn't see them. The Duke has positioned me as if I was still about to fall on him, a mocking smile on his face. Four spears of ice rose were carved out from the ground by roiling wind, rising to align with my shoulders and knees.

"Did you think resembling my form would make me hesitate?" he asked amusedly. "Let me disabuse you of the notion."

In that moment I watched his eyes and saw his entire concentration had gone into manipulating the spears. That was the thing with magic: no matter how old and bad you were, it was impossible to cast more than one spell at a time. He was *invested*, and withdrawing from that would take a few moments. The Beast laughed, standing behind my shoulder and baring its fangs. I could feel its warm breath on my cheek, feel my Name pulsing with it. For a moment I almost forced myself to speak, to ram a cheeky reply down his throat, but I pushed down the urge. *Monologues are for amateurs.* The spears began moving, slow to my eye, and I reached for the second bundle of power inside of me. Heat flowed through my veins and in the back of my head I heard a snapping sound, the very same the Penitent's Blade had made when I'd broken it over my knee. I'd thought about keeping it, after Liesse. When it was just a very sharp sword. But then the day after it had become light as a feather, for angels were not prone to metaphor, and I had seen my death writ on its edge. So I'd broken it, into a hundred pieces I'd had scattered over rivers and lakes so it would never be forged again.

It had not been an act without consequence.

**"Break,"** I croaked.

For an instant all I felt was my will pushing against something infinitely larger. If the Duke had fought me, I grasped, I would have been swept away by the tide effortlessly. But he wasn't fighting me. Magic was will, and *his will was in the spears*. The globe shattered, the Beast howling in approval. I'd been caught with my sword raised to strike and though the momentum had been blunted that was again how I began descending. Panic went through the fae's eye and a hastily-redirected spear caught me in the shoulder – but it was the wrong one, I laughed – then another tore through my side and finally my arm came down even as the ice tore through flesh and bone. The tip of the blade punched through the silver armour and straight through the heart.

"You," he gasped.

"Me," I replied, taking all that was left of my Name and pouring it into the blow as I scythed down through his body, cleaving it in half.

Icy red water poured out of the gaping wound and I ignored the pain from my shoulder long enough to raise my blade one last time, meeting the Duke's eyes as I struck. The head flew. I let out a groan of pain and exhaustion as I dropped to my knees. Shit. I'd been spending power like coppers throughout the entire fight just to survive, and now the well had run dry. Couldn't even muster my last use of Rise, it was slipping through my fingers. I groped blindly for my hand and found a signet ring there, gurgling out a triumphant laugh. With an ugly gasp I broke the spear that had bit deep in my shoulder, leaving the ice

inside and haltingly getting to my feet before trying the same with the one in my flank. My fingers were too weak – I botched the job and cried out when the ice dug deeper into my flesh. I saw the fae on the shore, vision swimming, and almost wept at the idea of having to make my way back there. Worse, the Heart was still rocking from the massive blow the Duke has struck earlier with his magic, though it was almost unnoticeable now. I paused. Entirely unnoticeable. The hair on my arm rose. Something was wrong. I looked down at my blade and dropped it in surprise. The red droplets falling from it were staying in the air, frozen. And now that I'd dropped it, it was staying still as well.

The Duke? Was this a variation on the globe from earlier? If the Duke wasn't dead – no, he had to be. Otherwise I wouldn't have the signet. There was a sharp snip from behind me and I turned. There was someone sitting at the edge of the Heart, a piece of ice and a knife in hand. He – it was a man, slender and dark-skinned – was carving the ice. His hair was long and dark, coming down in waves over his shoulders. On his brow I glimpsed a crown, fashioned in grey dead wood and weeping blood-red sap. He turned to me and a single glance was enough to have me fall to my knees. The ice in my shoulder *burned*, until the pain left and a strange and terrible clarity replaced it.

"Catherine Foundling," the King of Winter spoke.

The words were not words. They were mountains old as dawn ground to nothingness one season at a time, they were ice so deep in the heart of the world it had never seen the light of day. My ears were bleeding.

"Come, sit," he ordered. "It's time we had a little chat, don't you think?"

## Chapter 15: Bestowal

*"Most live out their days on an isle of vapid ignorance, shying away from the dark and hungry waters that surround it. To seek power is to brave the tides, but one who does should not expect to see those shores again."*

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

I forced myself back to my feet. This was too close to kneeling for my tastes. The movement came easier than I'd thought, easier than it *should* have – whatever he had done with the ice, it had strengthened me. For however long it would last. Fae gifts were notoriously fickle things. The King was carving his bauble of ice, ivory knife shaving off one sliver after another another. The sound was almost deafening, in the silence that had grasped this world. I made my way to the edge one step after another, almost slipping as I sat down. My bare hand held onto the ice and

I managed to settle by his side without tumbling down into the waters, pushing down a groan of pain. The ruler of Winter casually allowed another sliver of ice to fall down, indifferent to my struggles. I opened my mouth, then closed it. I'd stood before entities as powerful as this one before, but for once I was entirely unsure what to say. Not cowed, perhaps, but so aware of the current frailty of my existence I might as well be.

"You did well with Auster," the King said.

I could still hear echoes to his voice that had me cringing, but it was not as brutal as it had been easier. I wasn't seeing things instead of hearing words, at least. Had he restrained himself, or was I getting used to it? The second thought almost had me shiver. Some changes could only come at a price.

"First time killing a Duke," I croaked. "Wouldn't recommend it."

My throat was scraped a little too raw to manage flippancy properly, sadly. My attempt at humour fell flat – looking at the King's face for too long hurt my eyes, but from what I glimpsed there was no trace of amusement.

"Larat believed you would avoid the tale entirely," the King said. "But he is a creature of war, mine own Hound of Winter. One does not rely on the Prince of Nightfall to trace the path ahead."

The lack of depth perception probably didn't help his case, I thought, and the almost chuckle that escaped me set my lungs aflame. *Gods*, that was not a pleasant feeling. I needed to get run through less often.

"You backed me in a corner," I said.

"And this offends you?" the King of Winter said, sounding amused for the first time. "Submission is ever the lot of the weak. If you would rage at anything, rage at your own impotence."

I hacked out a mocking laugh along with what might just have been a chunk of my lung. The bit of flesh stained my lips red as I spat it out, like rouge paid for in blood.

"I'm not," I said. "Impotent. Wouldn't be here if I was. You need something from me."

"Ah, mortals," the creature fondly said. "Always you seek to bargain until the very last breath. Your kind is a wonder."

I'd always believed, deep down, that if I ever met a god it would be about this condescending. I was darkly pleased to be proved right.

"I already took what I need," I said.

"You took what I allowed," the King replied. "Do not mistake allowance for triumph."

Even with the clarity the ice had forced on me, I was exhausted. It had taken every scrap of what I had to get me through the fight with the Duke taking only three lethal wounds – never before had I ever spent that much power so quickly. His power had not made me better, not really: it just felt like I was too tired to sleep. If I'd been having this conversation with Heiress I would have called what was being said posturing, but what need did the fucking King of Winter have to posture with me? He could end me with a thought. He was in a league so far above my own even trying to grasp the difference between us might kill me. *And Ranger fights things like this for sport.* Merciless Gods, what kind of monsters had Black gathered under his banner?

"I'm too close to the grave to play this game properly," I said. "I lied my way to a claim. Are you going to deny me?"

He laughed. It sounded like wind against dead branches, like blood freezing inside a still-beating heart. I could feel the bones in my neck creak, feeling so fragile a single snap would break them.

"This is Winter, Catherine Foundling," he said. "You own what you kill."

"Then you'll stop attacking Marchford?" I asked.

"That purpose has already been served," the King said. "We are now part of the dream you call Callow."

And that settled that. I'd achieved what I'd set out to achieve, though I knew there'd be a price coming. It left an unpleasant taste in my mouth, the way this had all gone down. I'd been played since the beginning by something so much more dangerous than me that there was no retaliation I could deal out. The leverage I'd thought I had was enough to keep me alive, but nothing more – and pushing it would likely get me killed. I sat there next to a god, and prepared to make a mistake. I'd once thought that Masego's need to always be exact was because he was the Apprentice, but that wasn't entirely true. He'd had that tendency before he became the Apprentice, I now believed. Archer had led me to the greater truth: Named, whatever their Name, were *more*. We were larger in everything, and when we grew our flaws grew as well. Urges that had been ignorable when we were mortal no longer were. Black would always seek victory regardless of the costs, Archer would always indulge in what appealed to her and me? I'd once thought it was my reckless streak that had grown into the flaw that would get me killed, but that wasn't quite right. It was that the part of me that would have been able to bite its tongue was long buried. My mouth opened, knowing I was

about to commit a blunder. Because this wretch of a god had killed some of my people, and I could not let that go unanswered.

"You killed my men," I said. "When you sent your fae into my city."

"Your men would have died," he said. "What does it matter, that it was my doing or that of time?"

"You robbed them of the life they could have lived," I replied through gritted teeth. "You *took* from them. A debt is owed."

"Their existence weighed less than wind," the King said. "Nothing can be taken from nothing."

"This is not a bargain, King of Winter, it's an *oath*," I hissed. "One day, we'll meet again. Not tomorrow, not next month, not for decades. After your game's played out. After I've learned to kill gods. On that day, I'll come to collect."

"Will you?" he wondered.

It did not even take a heartbeat. Instantaneous would have been wrong still – it had always been the case that the water in my eyes was frozen. I felt blood running down the side of my face that should not be feeling anything at all. My bad leg, the one that still limped when I tired, twisted and broke with a sound like dead wood snapping. I heard the whistle of wind, more deafening than a hundred thousand horns, and after a flare of pain that dragged me to the edge of unconsciousness I heard nothing at all. I choked on my own tongue as frost spread over my skin, robbing me of the last of my senses.

"If I were a prince," the King told me, "I would be the Prince of Bleak Solstice. Some of that remains even under the Deadwood Crown."

I was a prisoner in my own body, the only sensation left to me the feeling of his fingers tipping up my chin.

"I could inflict on you every pain you've ever felt and some you cannot even conceive of," he said idly. "But you are of no use to me broken. One of those flitting around is quite enough."

His thumb ran its way up my cheek until it rested under my eye, and his other hand came to match it on the other side.

"You are in need of a reminder, Catherine Foundling," he said, "of the difference between bravery and ignorance."

The King clucked his tongue.

"No, not the eyes," he said. "Yours are too dull to make a fitting ornament. Something, perhaps, a little more pointed."



He withdrew from my face and the relief lasted for barely a moment before I felt his hand tear through my chest. I screamed soundlessly as his fingers closed around my beating heart, ripping it out like he was picking lint from cloth. The sorcery that had blanketed my senses lifted like a veil, leaving me on my feet with the King standing in front of me. I could see my heart in one hand, frozen black and solid. In the other was the bauble he'd been making out of ice, now a perfect carving of the moon. He thrust it where my heart had been, flesh closing around it as he withdrew and it began beating.

"I recognize you as heiress to the Duke of Violent Squalls," he said. "Made by prophecy, heirloom and the word of a king. Your inheritance, claimed by rite of blood, is confirmed."

I gasped for air, feeling the blood in my veins cooling further with every passing moment.

"Catherine Foundling," he said. "I name you Duchess of Moonless Nights. I grant you the seat of Marchford, and on these sacred grounds claim your fealty."

My surroundings ebbed away, replaced by deep and bottomless darkness. I stood there unmoving, seeing only the dark-skinned king and the blood-red sap dripping onto his brow from his wooden crown.

"I demand no fidelity and offer no respite," the King of Winter laughed. "I demand no faith and offer no protection. I give you slight and deceit, I receive hatred and betrayal. The Court of Winter receives you as one of its own, 'till your last desperate breath clawing at the dark."

Power pulsed in my chest, spreading through my veins. I felt the third part of my soul, the missing aspect I had yet to forge, fill with something old and too large to comprehend.

"I stand by my oath, dead thing," I rasped. "Before my days are done *I will see you unmade.*"

"Then you are a Duchess of Winter in truth," the King grinned, teeth like stolen moonlight. "I charge you with the defeat of Summer, Catherine Foundling. I charge you with the making of peace, exacted from the battlefield."

He leaned forward.

"You have six times the coming of your title, or your heart is forever mine," he said.

Hands rose to my face again, to my eyes.

"Now sleep," he said, "*and dream.*"

Fingers pulled down my pupils and darkness took me.

—

Dawn does not exist, then it does.

I see two cities and two lands around them. One is made of plenty, orchards of fruitful trees and fields of green. Juice runs down the chin of children as they bite into peaches, playing under the sun by pale walls. Colours for which there are no names yet fill half the world, proud lords and ladies clustering at the feet of a crowned and faceless silhouette. In its gaze is Summer, the heat that burns and hangs in the air like vapour. The other land is ice and illusion, and there nothing grows. Wind howls and creatures die under knives of obsidian, the warmth of their blood staining lips and chasing away, for a single blessed moment, the cruel bite of the chill. There the games of the children are vicious, for victory can only come from the defeat of others. At the heart of a maze, lords and ladies with smiles treacherous cluster at the feet of a crowned and faceless silhouette. In its gaze is Winter, the cold that that devours and leaves only absence behind.

War does not exist, then it does.

The hungry reach for the bounty of the full and this brings strife, as their taking is not gentle and this offence cannot go unanswered. Clarion calls make the sky shudder, for the host of Summer is a thing of might. They come in silk and steel, red pennants stirring in the wind like the promise of blood to come. Where they go noon follows, relentless and unforgiving as its heralds. Winter is not announced. It creeps like a snake in the dark, a slithering host of shades and clawed things that *want*, want until it hollows them out. They wear dead things and wield sharpness torn from the ground, eyes covetous under the blanket of night. None are valiant in the dark but all are desperate. *Justice*, the hooves of white winged horses thunder as they take flight. *More*, the blue-eyed things on horned horses whisper back, slender lances glinting. There are cries and screams. The moon falls, burnt black, and as it breaks the world Summer triumphs.

Noon spreads across two lands. Nothing is left of the hungry but ashes, trampled contemptuously. Ice melts away, leaving behind bleak black earth. The world is made a festival and Summer prospers, ripening again and again. The proud grow ever prouder, until the first fruit spoils. The sun does not rest and the land buckles under it. Pride turns to arrogance and under red pennants lords and ladies spill blood, turning on each other. Only one can have most, and none have ever tasted defeat. The land is scorched but there is no relief, for Summer advances and does not know retreat. The red haze hangs in the air like sickness as stomachs go from full to bursting like the fruits gone overripe, fire and steel claiming all until only the crowned and faceless silhouette

remains. It remains seated on the throne as yellow leaves and roots claim the world, facing the sun until only a seared carcass remains.

This is the truth of Summer: everything burns out.

Green sprouts from bleak black earth, and from this harvest a city grows. Spring has come. In the other land yellow turns to orange and brown, leaves falling to the ground as the land is finally freed from agony. Autumn has come. From those remains grows a city, feeding on what little there is to offer. One land grows to plenty, the other dies a slow death. The sun rises, ice spreads.

The story comes again.

The hungry reach for the bounty of the full and this brings strife, as their taking is not gentle and this offence cannot go unanswered. Clarion calls ring out, but they are silenced. The serpent slithers into the heart of Summer, offering peace and hidden fangs even as its hunger sharpens behind honeyed words. Poison spreads in the blood and champions die, for not even the mighty can overcome the many soft deaths of Winter. When the host of Summer comes it is gaping and limping, fresh to a war that came unannounced. *Justice*, the hooves of white winged horses thunder as they take flight. The shades laugh as they devour them. *More*, they whisper back to the dead. The mighty die slow among their red pennants, striking at smoke and mirrors as snow begins to blanket the world. The sun grows ever paler until it falls from the sky, shattering as it breaks the world and Winter triumphs.

Night spreads across two lands. Proud corpses are clawed to bloody bone as the host clad in death and theft spills forth. Juicy peaches are ripped from trees and bitten into as the trees that bore them wither and die. Ice snakes across once-green fields made bare by the hungry. Winter feeds, feeds until it can almost understand fullness. It is not enough. Pale and gloried walls are torn down, pennants drained of colour until all is bare and empty and still the host *wants*. There is less and less while there are still many so vicious games are made ever more vicious for in the end there will be only one mouthful left, and only one mouth to devour it. The night deepens and desperation does with it, as bleak winds and starvation take what murder and betrayal does not. Not even feeding off each other is enough. Then only the crowned silhouette on the throne remains, unmoving in the cold as it tries to feel something, *anything* and dies an empty husk.

This is the truth of Winter: we all die alone.

The cold turns on itself and a remnant of a remnant frees itself from the ground, green sprouting from the bleak black earth. From

this harvest a city grows, for Spring has come. In the land that was once Summer, the bare bones of what was once plenty are gnawed on. A city of the dying forms around the little turning to nothing, for Autumn shapes itself out of the coming of absence.

The story comes again. In the end, there is no end.

—

I wasn't sure exactly when I crossed the boundary from sleep to wakefulness. There was no transition, no burst of awareness. I was not awake, then I was. The thought had me shivering. I was under quilt, in a bed more rough than soft, and wearing clothes I didn't remember putting on. I rose to a seat and found myself surrounded by bare stone walls that were somewhat familiar. There were sounds coming from outside, but one closer: in a corner of the room, slumped in a chair, Hakram was snoring. *Marchford*, I realized. *I'm back*.

"Catherine?"

I glanced at the door as Adjutant jerked awake at the noise. Masego was at the threshold, looking somewhere in the middle of relieved and worried. I brushed back my hair absently.

"So," I said, "There's now a god on my murder list. Someone be a dear get me a drink – it's going to be a rough few months."

## **Villainous Interlude: Proscenium**

*"We should never forget that for a great evil to be defeated, a lesser evil must first become great."*

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty

Liesse was under siege, though forces had yet to deign test her walls. With the Summer Court having seized both Dormer and Holden, the two Callowan cities closest to the Waning Woods, the Empire had abandoned the south and begun mustering north of Vale instead. With fae hunting parties scouring the land coming from the west and the east, Akua had been forced to rely on her own wiles to keep her territory safe. Summer was holding court at Dormer and the true threats had yet to take the field, but even lesser nobles of Arcadia were dangerous enough. Unlike those of Winter, they would not control and subjugate the population: all those who did not immediately bow to the Queen of Summer were destroyed a riot of flame. Which was rather unfortunate, since Diabolist still needed southern labour to finish her work in Liesse. The fae were not being accommodating of her timetable.

Gathering a force of her own to field had proven tiresome, though she'd been granted an unexpected boon. Since she'd publically sacrificed the last mercenary force she'd hired in Mercantis –

not that the merchants had particularly minded, after she'd paid up her very expensive penalty fees – hiring fresh blood had been difficult. The war in the Free Cities had ensured the most reputable companies were already all being employed by one side or the other, anyway, leaving behind only the dregs. Levantine raiders too savage for that already savage nation, a company of unreliable drow exiles and, amusingly enough, Helikean soldiers who'd been enemies of both the Exiled Prince and the ruling Tyrant. The last of those three were the steadiest, but they numbered only a thousand.

The boon, she had engineered herself with the gracious help of Mother and Dread Empress Malicia. Even as the south of Callow went up in flames, the Wasteland had gone to war with itself. After High Lady Tasia of Wolof had defaulted on several payments owed the Tower for granted privileges, Akua's cousin Sargon had immediately attempted a coup. Normally he would not have dared: it was one thing for Cousin Sargon to set himself against Mother, another to attempt the theft of the due of a Named. But the Diabolist had sent him a discreet message, conceding to his claim in exchange for several concessions involving gold and sundry favours. Armed rebellion exploded in Wolof before the day was out. Sargon had won the initial skirmish after deploying a dozen powerful devils, at which point Mother had responded by unleashing a demon on his men. The mess that ensued escalated in brutality.

Dread Empress Malicia sent in all the Legions garrisoning Praesi territory to restore order even as what remained of the Truebloods watched the greatest among them being cornered like an animal. Akua had, naturally, reached out to the most prominent members left. Gold, men and mages had flowed to her territory as Holden fell to the Summer Court and she became flanked on both sides. Including her mercenaries, Akua now had slightly over ten thousand soldiers under her command. Of them almost a tenth were mages, though only a handful of those could touch High Arcana. Still, it had been an effort to keep the delight off her face: oh, the kind of things she could *make* with this many spellcasters at her disposal.

And she would have to make them, of this there was no doubt. No reinforcements were coming for the foreseeable future. The legions of the Wasteland were busy keeping Wolof contained, and would not be able to march anywhere for months. There'd been talk of some of the legions guarding the Red Flower Vales under Marshal Grem One-Eye coming south as the orc himself took operational command, but Proceran movement on the other side of the border had smothered that notion in the crib. Cordelia Hasenbach might rule over a mongrel nation, but Akua had to give her this: she was a fair hand at the Great Game. With One-Eye and his men remaining to prevent an invasion by the Principate, command had fallen to Marshal Ranker in Denier – who'd also had

to decline, as the Duchy of Daoine had declared full mobilization of the Watch and refused to give any explanation.

That left General Istrid with seniority, and she'd stripped Summerholm of its garrison before marching south to muster all she could north of Vale. As a crowning irony the single largest army in Callow, the Fifteenth under General Juniper, was forced in a defensive position at Marchford and unable to participate. The gate into Arcadia could not be left undefended: the Winter Court might just decide to establish a beachhead of their own, and not even Praes could withstand the pressure of two Courts running rampant. Until Foundling reappeared, her people were paralyzed. It had been most amusing to see everything Squire had built over the last year collapse the moment she was gone, Diabolist had to admit. Upon hearing word of Squire's disappearance into Arcadia the Praesi among the Ruling Council had swiftly struck a deal with the Guild of Assassins and seized power in Laure before declaring martial law across Callow – a move greeted with widespread rioting in the cities.

Best of all, when the usurpers had first accessed the treasury they'd found absolutely nothing: the Guild of Thieves had already emptied it in full, and to add insult to injury taken a tithe of a tenth from every Imperial Governor's own funds. Callow had descended into utter anarchy and in the chaos Akua's own hands were freer than ever before. She held the only remaining stronghold in the south, her workforce had swelled with refugees and until Summer was dealt with she was essentially untouchable no matter what she did. The Empire could not afford for her to rise in rebellion, not with this many wolves at the gate. The situation, Diabolist thought, had fallen into her lap like a gift from the Gods Below. The dark-skinned woman strode the smouldering battlefield where her forces had prevailed not an hour past, Fasili trailing her dutifully. He'd been in command for the engagement, the largest one her army had waged so far.

"Fewer than two hundred casualties, Lady Diabolist," the other aristocrat said. "The revolving wards were a success: all their heavyweights focused on breaking them rather than firing mass magic at our troops."

The conversation would be a very different one if the new wards had failed, Akua thought. There'd been a Count among the catches of the day, and if one of those had decided to decimate her ranks she'd have lost at least a fifth of her soldiers. What the fae of Summer lacked in subtlety, they more than made up in destructive power. The very reason that her mages had been instructed to capture instead of kill, at it happened.

"I want their corpses raised by nightfall," she ordered. "Form a separate unit from the unded, under a cadre of necromancers. I expect their ranks will swell before this is over."

"It will be as you say," the other Soninke nodded.

"As for the wards, I've been told one of them was fractured," the Diabolist said. "We'll need to refine the concept."

"Your First Mage is already designing improvements," Fasili replied. "We won a great victory today, my lady. Fae with titles of this magnitude are hard to kill, much less subdue."

The Diabolist's lips quirked the slightest bit at the words. Fasili would take it as approval of his flattery, but the truth was different: it had been a very long time since any Praesi had a First Mage. The title had fallen out of favour when the Name of Warlock emerged: being the most powerful of a High Lord's spellcasters had been judged to be meaningless when there was the greater accolade of a Name to be claimed. Her revival of the title had been for largely personal reasons, though she did approve of the tribute to ancient custom.

"The Count of Golden Harvest," she said slowly, savouring the title.

"And two Baronesses," Fasili added with a vicious smile.

Fewer than a hundred fae without court titles had also been caught, though they paled in importance compared to the other three. They would be useful fodder, true enough, but for some rituals quality was required over quantity. Leaving behind the sea of tents her soldiers were setting up for the night, the two of them made their way to the wide flat plain to the side of where the battle had taken place. There were four massive wards in place there, her mages milling around them like busy little bees. The largest held all the lower-ranked fae, shackled in iron and badly beaten. Though much weaker than the titled fae, their number alone was enough to make them dangerous: a hundred and fifty mages maintained the ward in rotating shifts to ensure no concerted attempt could be made to break the glowing sigils hanging in the air that kept them prisoner. The other three wards were not so heavily manned: they held one of the high-ranked nobles individually each of them under three times three bindings, all interlocked and reinforcing each other.

It was around the wards imprisoning the Count of Golden Harvest that a greying Soninke with a closely-cropped beard was kneeling, fingers dancing nimbly across a set of runes floating in the air. Akua studied them curiously: High Arcana, all of them, yet she did not recognize all of them. She was not surprised. Brilliant she might be, but she was still young and Dumisai of Aksum had spent a lifetime plumbing the depths of sorcery. A moment later the runes rearranged themselves before disappearing as a hum of power came from the ward surrounding the Count. The fae grunted in pain, drawing interest from the mage close to him.

"Is it physically painful to have more than nine tenths of your power restrained?" he asked in Mtethwa.

"I will see you made ash for this insolence, sorcerer," the Count of Golden Harvest hissed.

"Your threats are of no academic value, creature," the man noted. "This is most unproductive."

"First Mage," Fasili interrupted, his head dipping in respect.

The sorcerer jerked in surprise, only then realizing he had company behind him. He smiled at Akua's right hand man hesitantly.

"Good evening," he began, then trailed off. "... You."

"Lord Fasili Mirembé," Akua provided, too well-practiced to be openly amused..

"Yes," he said. "That."

"Papa," the Diabolist greeted warmly as her father rose to his feet.

"Mpanzi," the older man smiled. "Lord Warlock's research appears to be accurate. From what I've seen fae are made of the same matter than Arcadia itself – there is no difference at a fundamental level between one of them and, say, a stone taken from there."

"How *dare* you," the Count said angrily.

Her father absent-mindedly waved a hand and a gag of blue runes appeared in the fae's mouth, stuffing it shut.

"Your ritual is prepared, before I forget," he said. "Very good materials you've secured. Conversion rates for fae will be much higher than with human sacrifices."

"That will be all, Lord Fasili," Akua said, half-turning towards him.

"By your leave, Lady Diabolist," the other Soninke bowed.

He cast an irritated glance at Papa before leaving, but there was no true heat there. Her father's absolute lack of ambition in matters of authority made him the opposite of a rival and her known fondness for him meant he was too costly to retaliate against for a slight as minor as the one he'd been handed. No doubt an officer would be on the receiving end of Fasili's irritation before the night was over. One of the drow, most likely. They found it difficult to take orders from a man, even



if that man had given his allegiance to a woman, and Praesi highborn did not have much tolerance for insubordination.

"He seems a very reliable young man," Papa said, watching him walk away.

*He would have you dead within an hour if given leave,* Akua thought. Her father had spent his entire adult life under the distant, if vicious, protection of Mother: he'd never had to develop the kind of nose for enmity that most powerful Praesi mages needed to survive. His judgement in these matters was... lacking. In most people Akua would have considered this a crippling flaw, but in truth she preferred him like this. Unaware of the dangers lurking around him, able to do what he loved without worry. She could keep him safe from the scavengers. Diabolist had made it very clear to her subjects that Dumisai of Aksum was not to be touched: feeding a scheming minor noble to a swarm of imps in full view of her court had made that point very thoroughly.

"He has his uses," Akua conceded.

Papa nodded, already visibly bored with the avenue of conversation.

"With today's lot you've almost two hundred of the lesser fae," he said. "That should be enough for a Lesser Breach."

The term was fairly technical, and few aside from Praesi mages would have known its meaning. Diabolism was, at its heart, a branch of magic concerned with the summoning, binding and contracting of devils. And demons, of course, though resorting lightly to such creatures was the path to fates worse than death. Her people had practiced this kind of sorcery since days predating the Miezani occupation and while it had originally been a means for a single practitioner to gain power or knowledge, under the Empire it had become developed as a tool of war. Dread Empress Triumphant – may she never return – was widely held as the greatest diabolist to ever live, above even the Dead King. She'd summoned and bound entire legions of devils, put demons at their head and her bindings had been so well-crafted they had held for centuries after her demise. To raise an entire host of devils, as she had, means other than summoning them one at a time had to be used: the amount of wasted time and power would otherwise be massive.

The method to get around this was called a Breach: a portal into one of the Hells would be opened, with a mass binding woven into it. Any devil crossing into Creation would be subject to said binding, allowing for a degree of control – though a much looser one than if the binding had been designed for a specific entity instead. Convention divided Breaches between the Lesser and the Greater. Akua herself had used a Lesser Breach at Liesse when

deploying her army of devils until the mages of the Fifteenth shut it down, fuelling it with the lives of the Stygian slaves. A Lesser Breach was temporary and unstable by nature, impossible to maintain for long. A Greater Breach was a different matter entirely, and only one had occurred in all of Calernian history: the Dead King's ritual in Keter, which had opened a permanent and stable portal into one of the Hells. Little progress had been made since then in understanding exactly how the Greater Breach had been made, though Diabolist had come to understand some part of it.

"More fuel would be preferable, but I don't have the time to spare," Akua said. "I'll have to do with limited numbers and make second Breach when we've the fae for it."

"You'd get more meat for the expense if you went lower than the Thirtieth Hell," Papa pointed out. "As it is a seventh of that power goes into the Due."

"Foundling made it very clear during the Rebellion that a well-trained army will tear through anything lower than the Thirtieth, given time to prepare," Diabolist replied. "The Summer Court is in a league above what her forces were back then. If I want the devils to survive the first engagement, I can't use *chumaili* or *kichabwa*."

Her father hummed, mulling it over.

"Well, you won't get many *walin-falme* but you can be sure they won't die easy," he said.

The term meant *imperial guard*, in an archaic dialect of Mtethwa. The devils were old favourites of Tyrants seeking to invade Callow, preferred to more bestial breeds for their above average intelligence and ability to use forged armaments. They were also noted for their resistance to fire, though it was difficult to model how effective it would be against fae flame. Their leathery skin and deformed bat wings had many mages speculating Dread Emperor Sorcerous had used them as breeding stock to create the much larger winged monsters that were used to access higher levels of the Tower, and would allow them to answer fae flight on the battlefield. It was a shame, truly, that she would not get more than four hundred of them from the Lesser Breach. Their inaptitude for tactical thinking was perhaps their greatest weakness, and the reason they usually served under the command of the Black Knight of the era. Akua lacked such a commander however, which was why it had been so important to capture the high-ranked fae. The Lesser Breach could wait until the prisoners had been brought back to Liesse, but Diabolist intended to summon her officers tonight.

"The Count first," she said.

"For the best," Papa agreed. "He'll be the most exhausting."

The two of them strode into the ward keeping the Count of Golden Harvest contained, the thick and heavy magic washing over their skin. Her father flicked his wrist and the gag in the fae aristocrat's mouth dissolved.

"You court your doom, mortals," he said harshly. "My Queen will have vengeance for what happened today."

"There is a theory by a very clever man," Papa said, entirely ignoring the threat,, "that fae can die in truth."

"Your ignorance rivals only your arrogance, sorcerer," the Count sneered.

"Slitting your throat returns you to Arcadia, to be born again," her father continued. "But, ah, fae are made of power are they not?"

"We are Summer incarnate," the creature smiled. "You will all burn under the sun."

"Yes, power incarnate," the greying man said admiringly. "What happens, then, if this power is *used up*?"

"No mere insect can undo the workings of the Gods," the fae said.

"I do not believe," Diabolist said, "that we have been introduced."

The Count glanced at her with contempt.

"I know what you are, cursed one," he spat. "Defeat is carved into the bones of your kind."

"My name," she said, "is Akua Sahelian. I am a villain."

"The pale imitation of an ancient enemy," the fae mocked.

"Oh yes," Diabolist agreed softly. "That is exactly what I am. *The Enemy*, they call us in the West. I am the last of a line unbroken since time immemorial. My kind has usurped the mantle of gods, stolen secrets from beyond Creation and turned kingdoms into sea. I am Praesi of the old blood, fae. You should kneel in awe."

"You are the dying ember of a fire long gone," the Count sneered. "Soon to be put out by the might of Summer."

"You think you know *might*?" Akua laughed. "I will turn your blood to smoke. I will feed the horrors that crush your bones with the sound of your screams. The hearts of your children will raise my fortresses to the sky and make my ships sail on solid ground. You

may have been godlings in your wretched home, but you've stepped down from that pedestal – and down here, we bleed the likes of you over altars. Your poor, misbegotten creature. You actually believe you have a chance."

Her Name pulsed beneath her skin even as her eyes turned cold.

"But you're in Creation now, Count. Here be monsters."

The Count smirked.

"Do you seek to frighten me, child? Summer does not know fear."

Akua slowly unsheathed her knife, resting the wickedly sharp edge on the side of the fae's throat. He looked into her eyes, undaunted. Diabolist smiled.

"No, not yet," she murmured. "But I will *teach* you."

## **Villainous Interlude: Stormfront**

*"The covenant of the hungry lasts as long as the meal."*  
– Taghreb saying

Anaxares was having a tea party with monsters.

A civil one, he had to admit. The ridiculously large and opulent table – it was Ashuran pearwood, he was fairly sure, which meant it was worth a small castle – had been set on a platform in the morning, long before the Black Knight had actually arrived. There were jewels set into the surface of it that glinted the same no matter what light fell on them that he believed would be able to shoot out beams of energy if the Tyrant spoke the right incantation. At least the whole thing wasn't floating. The boy had suggested all of this should be happening with the platform a hundred feet up in the air, but Anaxares had flatly informed him he wasn't setting foot on anything that wasn't touching solid ground. After the usual round of inventive death threats, the Tyrant had conceded the point and instead had gargoyles place over all four corners. At least one of them was badly failing to pretend it was still inanimate. Anaxares had thrown a biscuit at it earlier, just to see what it would do.

Glare at his back when it thought he wasn't looking, apparently. Foolish creature, all Bellerophans knew you should always assume someone was looking at you. *The Kanenas See All, For Their Eyes Are The Eyes Of The Law And The Law Is Omniscient*, he added dutifully. Kairos had put on a version of the Helikean infantry armour that was made of pure gold, with pauldrons he suspected were actual real skulls. All three people at the table were politely pretending they could not hear the hissing angry ghosts bound inside said skulls. The Tyrant had tried to dress him up in

silks but Anaxares had ignored the servants and instead continued to wear his old diplomat's robes, which he made a point of washing himself. They were beginning to look rather frayed, but accepting clothes from the boy would count as Taking A Bribe From A Foreign Despot. Him aside, the two villains sitting across each other were a study in contrasts. Studying Named as openly as he was always a dangerous business, but Anaxares was already a dead man. What was left to fear?

He'd expected the Black Knight to be some tall muscled Soninke, but the villain was short – shorter than the Tyrant, if not by much – and pale like a Callowan. He'd not believed that particular rumour to be true. Weren't the farmers on the side of Good? It was hard to tell what his build was under the plain plate he wore, but it was obvious that though he was no slab of muscle he was an athletic man. In opposition Kairos Theodosian was so thin he looked almost sickly. Like most people of the Free Cities the Tyrant was tan and dark of hair, that last part one of the few things the villains had in common. It was the eyes, though, that set them apart the most. The murderous red eye of the Tyrant looked upon everything with warm poison while the pale green gaze of the Black Knight was cold, unmoving detachment. They were two different takes on an old breed, these villains, and though their faces were pleasant and smiling Anaxares could smell the violence wafting in the air like summer heat. The Praesi set down his cup on the saucer, Nicean porcelain clinking softly.

"That was the purest arsenic I've ever drunk," the Knight said. "My compliments to your alchemists."

There was a reason Anaxares had left his own cup untouched. Unlike these two he couldn't be expected to walk off a mouthful of poison.

"That's very kind of you," the Tyrant beamed. "We tortured the secrets of substance refinement out of a Taghreb exile a few decades back, so really it's all thanks to the Empire."

The two of them were still smiling. Anaxares would have shivered, if terror had any point to it.

"I see you've set your table with fire rubies," the Black Knight noted. "A nice touch. I might lose an eye if you triggered those without warning."

"Burn," the Tyrant suddenly barked, leaning forward.

A heartbeat of silence passed and nothing happened.

"You could have flinched, at least," the boy pouted.

The Black Knight smiled serenely, drinking another sip of poison.

"Shame the rest of the Calamities couldn't come," Kairos said, whimsically changing the subject.

"It would have been most impolite of me to enter your camp without some precautions," the green-eyed man said.

"Are you implying I would murder an ally in broad daylight for no good reason?" the Tyrant said, aghast.

"You would," Anaxares said.

"I could state it outright, if you'd prefer," the Black Knight kindly offered.

The crippled boy tried to drum his fingers on the table casually, but his hand was shaking so badly it looked more like he was thumping it. The ghosts bound to his armour screamed angrily, the sound strangely muted. The diplomat was beginning to find it soothing, to be honest. He felt too weary to scream in horror himself but having someone else express the sentiment was gratifying.

"Don't," Kairos finally decided. "My most trusted advisor took the fun out of it."

Green eyes turned to study said advisor almost curiously, to the man's dismay.

"You are Bellerophon, correct?" the Knight asked.

"You already know the answer to that," Anaxares replied, picking up a biscuit.

He'd been assured those weren't poisoned, so he broke off a piece and scarfed it down.

"It's been a subject of debate as to why you are still alive," the pale-skinned man said, not denying it.

His eyes flicked at the Tyrant, who shrugged.

"Haven't done a thing," Kairos said.

It was actually hard to tell when the Tyrant was lying, in Anaxares' opinion. He did so frequently and about matters both mundane and important without rhyme or reason, which meant establishing a baseline for truth and lies was difficult.

"Thinking too much about why is the curse of unenlightened peoples," the diplomat asserted. "Peerless Bellerophon Is Always Correct For The People Cannot Be Wrong, May They Reign Forever."

"I love it when he does that," the Tyrant said. "It's like they're whispering sweet propaganda straight into my ear."

"Bellerophon does have a surprisingly effective indoctrination apparatus," the Knight agreed.

Spoken like an Enemy Of The People, Anaxares thought with a frown.

"So why are you haunting my doorstep, Black Knight?" Kairos suddenly said.

There'd been no transition from pleasantries to business, no hint or warning. The Bellerophon had seen him do this many a time now, with almost everyone he spoke to. He was not sure whether the quicksilver change was meant to unsettle whoever he dealt with and gain him an advantage or if the Tyrant was genuinely that unstable. It might, he suspected, be both.

"We meant to speak with you in Delos, but events conspired against it," the other villain replied.

As a career diplomat, Anaxares could admire how well-crafted that sentence had been. The use of the word conspiracy would imply fault, while on surface absolving responsibility – a counterpart already on the defensive would feel bound to offer explanation. A shame that tactics like those were worthless against the Tyrant. The boy, after all, was mad.

"Your play there spoiled my amusement," Kairos complained. "I was a sennight away from making a dragon from the bones of their fallen. I was going to crash it into the citadel and demand their surrender."

"You would have been repulsed," the Knight said, and it was spoken like a fact.

Considering every assault by Helike on Delos had met that exact fate, Anaxares believed him to be entirely correct.

"That's the problem with Praesi, these days," the Tyrant replied with an unpleasant smile. "You worry too much about things like victory and defeat."

"No worry would have been necessary on your part," the pale man said. "Victory would have been yours if your host had assaulted the walls instead of retreating."

"And how *boring* that would have been," Kairos said. "I take no hand outs from the Tower, Carrion Lord."

"We have enemies in common," the Knight calmly pointed out. "Dismissing the possibility of common striving against them is counterproductive."

Kairos cackled.

"You don't have a pattern of three against the White Knight, do you?" he said.

The Praesi's face was blank, a wax mask without expression. Then, slowly, his brow creased.

"Neither do you," he said.

"Someone's hourglass is running out," the Tyrant grinned, sing-songing the words as his red eye pulsed. "Regretting taking that apprentice, are we?"

"My decision has never been more justified," the man disagreed serenely.

"*Spineless*," Kairos stated with thick contempt. "You lack rage, Black Knight. If you were any more resigned to your fate you'd be licking the boots of the Heavens."

The Knight did not seem particularly offended by the insults. He did not seem, Anaxares, as the kind of man who could easily be offended. It would have been most unpleasant to negotiate with him.

"There is a difference between acknowledging the possibility of failure and embracing the outcome," the Praesi said.

"That you even accept the chance of defeat is disgusting, if you'll forgive my language, much less that you plan for it," the Tyrant hissed. "You are a *villain*. We do not go gently into the night."

"There are graveyards full of men who thought the same," the Knight replied. "They died having accomplished nothing."

"You're scribbling on sand and calling it a legacy," Kairos mocked. "Nothing that happens before or after you matters – only the decisions you make *now*. And those I see you make? I find lacking."

"Means are irrelevant," the Black Knight coldly said. "Results dictate all else."

"I despise you and everything you stand for from the bottom of my heart," the Tyrant enthused. "Shall we work together?"

Anaxares quietly choked on the biscuit he'd been nibbling at, entirely ignored by the other two.

"That would be best," the green-eyed man acknowledged. "The Empire is not interested in direct intervention. Resolution by local actors is preferable in Her Dread Majesty's eyes."



"What you actually want is for Procer to lose their pretext to go a'crusading," Kairos laughed. "So what's the plan, my dearest friend? Peace with Nicae?"

"Cessations of hostilities between League constituents would allow you to turn your attention elsewhere," the Black Knight replied. "There are no real gains left for you to make."

"And just by coincidence, that 'elsewhere' happens to be eyeing your borders," the Tyrant mused.

"Aligned interests are not the same as subordination," the other villain said.

"Not all that far, though," Kairos said. "Regardless, Nicae's not interested in peace right now. They're growing too fat on Proceran silver and soldiers."

"Stripping them of that fat would make them reconsider their position," the Knight said.

"One last battle, eh?" the Tyrant laughed. "That could be interesting. But they've so many heroes, my dear friend. I'm terrified of what those could do to me. I'm only one boy, after all."

Kairos had not even attempted a token effort to make that lie sound plausible, the diplomat noted.

"We intend to engage the White Knight and his companions again," the pale man said.

"I feel safer already," the Tyrant grinned toothily. "It's so nice, having friends."

The Black Knight nodded, unmoved.

"Scribe will be in contact with you shortly," he said, rising to his feet.

The boy waved away the notion, unconcerned. He waited until the Praesi was at the edge of the platform.

"Black?" he called out.

The man glanced back.

"I'm going to betray you, you know," the Tyrant promised.

The thing that looked back at the boy then was not a person Named or not. Humanity had slid off that face like water off a clay mask, leaving behind absolutely nothing – the thing behind those eyes was coldly taking their measure, calculating the span of their usefulness and the death that would follow it. Carrion

Lord, they called him, and the diplomat finally understood why. Why this... thing could cow the third of a continent.

"You will try," the Black Knight replied. "They always do."

—

The diplomat had expected them to leave after the other villain exited the camp, but they remained at the table. Kairos was still drinking his tea, exaggeratedly holding up his little finger so it never touched the cup.

"What are we waiting for?" Anaxares finally asked.

It was the crown of noon, and staying in the sun this long always gave him a headache.

"The counteroffer," the Tyrant said.

The sound of the teapot's lid being raised drew his attention a moment later. There was a woman leaning over it, from the Free Cities by the looks of her. Long and curly dark hair, curvy under her leathers that he could smell reeked of spirits even from where he was seated. The stranger had a silvery flask in hand and was pouring what looked like Proceran brandy inside the teapot — she didn't stop until it started spilling over, only then pouring herself a cup of 'tea'. Nine tenths of that had to be liquor, he thought. And it was probably still lethal to drink, not that it stopped her from gulping down her her cup and messily wiping her lips with her sleeve.

"I don't know where you get your arsenic, Kairos, but it's the good stuff," she said. "You can really taste the almonds."

"Anaxares, this is Aoede the Wandering Bard," the Tyrant smiled fondly. "She's here to manipulate me like she did near Delos."

"You're a heroine," the diplomat said, face creasing in surprise.

"I'm starving is what I am," the Bard complained. "Hand me a biscuit, would you?"

Anaxares did, too baffled to object.

"Did you have fun with the Big Guy?" Aoede asked with her mouth full.

"You were right," Kairos said. "I want to kill him so very *much*."

"Yeah, he doesn't really play your kind of game," the Bard said. "Who's this charming fellow, by the way?"

She was pointing the remnant of his biscuit at him like a wand, hand wavering as she poured herself another cup of of tea-flavoured liquor.

"This is Anaxares, my most trusted advisor," Kairos grinned. "I abducted him. He's not very happy about it."

The dark-haired woman squinted at him, slurping her cup loudly. For a moment Anaxares could have sworn she was entirely sober and studying him with a piercing gaze, but then she choked on the liquor and the moment was gone. She thumped her own chest until she stopped coughing, spilling biscuit crumbs everywhere.

"You're a class act, Tyrant," she said admiringly, still breathless. "Haven't seen anything that brazen since Traitorous."

"Flatterer," Kairos replied. "Now, speak treachery to me Aoede. Treachery most foul."

"Right," the Bard said, putting her cup down and leaning against the table. "So obviously I'm trying to trick you to your death here."

"As is only right and proper," the Tyrant agreed.

"So here's something for you to consider," she continued. "You should off a Calamity."

"Or not," Anaxares suggested mildly. "We could, in fact, not do this."

"Tell me more," Kairos ordered.

"So your grand plan, it's not really a plan," the Bard said. "It's a juggler's philosophy."

"I've no idea what you could possibly mean," the Tyrant smiled.

"First step always works, so always have a first step going," Aoede said. "Now, a lesser soul would say all that will accomplish is destroy more and and more of Creation until it all collapses on your head because you missed a beat."

"The part that matters is the dance," Kairos smiled. "Not the bow at the end."

"And I applaud that, I really do. Here's the thing, though," the Bard said. "You're running out of enemies, Kairos Theodosian."

"I can make more," the Tyrant pointed out.

"Lesser ones," Aoede shrugged. "Not a lot of heroes running around at the moment and you've already slapped around most of the League. You need to expand your roster, my friend."

She added an exaggerated wink after calling him that, to the Tyrant's visible delight.

"So I backstab Praes, if you'll forgive my language," he mused. "Alas, killing a Calamity also helps the horse you have in this race."

"You don't need to wield the knife yourself," the Bard said. "Use my heroes against them, just blatantly enough the Big Guy knows what you did."

"It is lesser treachery that you peddle, then," Kairos replied, tone disappointed.

"That's where you're wrong," the dark-haired woman slurred. "Point isn't to make the Calamity die, it's to *make an enemy of Black*. He loves them like family, you know. You need to hurt him at least that deep if you want him not to let go of the grudge. Anything less and the moment he's back in Praes you drop off the stage."

"This plan involves making an enemy of one of the most dangerous men on this continent for no tangible gain," Anaxares said. "It is not a good plan."

"Don't be foolish, advisor," Kairos said. "Making an enemy of one of the most dangerous men on this continent is the *point* of the plan, not a side-effect."

"And to think you said I was bringing lesser treachery to the table," the Bard said shaking her head. "I'm wounded, Kairos."

"I'm deeply sorry," the Tyrant said. "As an apology, let me offer you this: *nocere*."

The jewels on the table immediately lit up and shot half a dozen beams of scorching red light at the Wandering Bard, who disappeared into thin air before a single one of them made contact. There was a long moment of silence.

"She's playing you," Anaxares pointed out, aware it was blindingly obvious but believing the boy could use a reminder.

"Oh yes," the Tyrant smiled, and his eye pulsed red. "Just imagine the kind of enemy she'll make, when I betray her too."

## Chapter 16: Shambles

"See, this is exactly the kind of trouble I'd be avoiding by mind controlling the entire world. You fools are making my point for me, can't you see?"

– Dread Emperor Imperious, shortly before being torn apart by an Ater mob

"That's not the good news face," I said.

There were only three of us in the war room: Juniper, Ratface and myself. We'd have a real staff meeting later today or tomorrow, but for now I'd kept the people to a minimum. When the whole family was at the table discussions tended to take longer, and for now what I wanted was a solid notion of what had happened in Callow while I was gone. And, to my unpleasant surprise, I'd been gone quite a bit longer than I'd thought: three months as of the morning I woke up. Considering Summer had already been probing the borders when I'd left and being well aware that Heiress was going to go full bastard the moment I disappeared, I was not expecting a basket of flowers. Yet the sheer dourness on the Hellhound's face gave me pause. I glanced at Ratface – he wasn't looking any happier. Well, at least it was unlikely to be worse than having my heart stolen by an angry Winter god. Weeping Heavens, let it not be worse than having my heart stolen by an angry Winter god. I firmly believed that was not too high of a bar to set for this conversation, but already I was getting the beginnings of a headache.

"Everything's fucked," Ratface flatly contributed.

"Fucked *how*," I prompted. "That's the important part."

"Military affairs first," Juniper said. "We are at war on at least two fronts, possibly up to five."

I missed the days when two mortal enemies had been the upper limit, not the starting point.

"Summer," I counted out. "Heiress?"

"Diabolist," Ratface corrected grimly.

"She transitioned?" I said. "Shit. I had my money on her aiming for Dread Empress off the bat."

"You weren't the only one," my Supply Tribune said. "Everybody's wondering what her game is, right now."

"A lot of people dying, if I had to venture I guess," I grunted. "All right, Juniper, lay it on me. Summer. What are we dealing with?"

"We don't have hard numbers," the Hellhound replied. "Trying to scry them lost two mages their eyesight."

The dream I'd had before waking up in Creation was still fresh in my mind – it didn't feel like a memory, something that would fade in time or become less vivid. A Name dream was the closest equivalent I could come up with, and even those didn't feel quite as... tangible, afterwards. Considering some of the things I'd seen

Summer do in that sequence, I wasn't all that surprised scrying them was dangerous. It must have been like staring straight into the sun.

"But you have guesses," I said.

She nodded, and tapped her thick fingers against the map spread across the table to get my attention. There were two red stones set in southern Callow: one on Dormer, the other on Holden. Considering those two were the closest Callowan cities to the Waning Woods, why they were marked as Summer strongholds needed no explanation.

"We've received intelligence from General Sacker that was collected from refugees of both cities," Juniper gravelled. "One of them was former Royal Guard, so we can put more stock in her assessment of force numbers. At least five thousand both times, and we're fairly sure it wasn't the same army."

Ten thousand godsdamned fairies. No wonder she'd looked like someone had shot Aisha, earlier. Even the few hundred lesser fae we'd had to contain in Marchford had inflicted rough losses on the Fifteenth, and unlike those poor expendable bastards Summer would have titled fae leading their hosts.

"Have they moved since taking the cities?" I asked.

"No," my general said. "Not on any large scale, anyway. They're sending raiding parties but nearly all of them are headed towards our second problem."

The orc did not need to point at the black stone set over Liesse for me to know what she was talking about.

"She shouldn't have any forces to speak of," I said. "I had the Ruling Council strike down her right to anything but a city guard."

And her own personal retinue, a privilege granted to Praesi highborn that not even I could touch. Given her high birth the number allowed was not negligible – a thousand men – but still very far from an army.

"She doesn't care about the Council anymore," Ratface said. "No one does, Cat. But we'll talk about that mess later."

A trickle of the fury that went through me at those words must have shown on my face, because when the dark-eyed Taghreb looked at me he paled. I took a long breath, calming myself. It did not escape my notice that the temperature in the war room had significantly cooled. *Joy, another power that'll start backfiring if I don't learn how it works, I thought. Just what I needed.*

"She's hired mercenaries," Juniper said. "Levantines, Helikeans and allegedly some drow."

"The last bunch she hired was wiped out to the last man," I frowned. "By us, even."

"She scraped the bottom of the barrel in Mercantis," Ratface said. "But over half her people are from the Wasteland and those will be reliable. She's pretty much taken over the Truebloods."

"And her mother's done nothing about this?" I said, surprised.

"Her mother is fighting her own war in Wolof," the tanned man replied. "Against a nephew trying to overthrow her and the Legions trying to contain the angry beehive the city turned into."

"The Empress intervened," I said.

"With a light touch," Juniper grunted. "But she can't allow the kind of summons they're throwing at each other to spill out into the Wasteland. There's reports of a demon being used."

I didn't ask what kind – *any* kind was bad enough. That meant no reinforcements from Praes, which was as much a relief as it was a problem. We'd be on our own for this.

"Praesi," I said. "So, household troops and mages?"

"A lot of mages," Ratface said. "And with Liesse currently packed with refugees, I don't need to tell you how bad that could get."

"If she so much as sacrifices a single man she's rebelling," I coldly said.

"She's already rebelling, Foundling," Juniper said. "She's been summoning devils to pit against the fae – your Council made laws against that. And you don't assemble an illegal army of ten thousand if you intend to return to the fold afterwards."

"She's reached her end game, then," I muttered. "Fuck. It's always trouble to fight Praesi when they're cornered. Everybody knows that."

There was no longer any debate about whether or not Heiress – no, Diabolist, I needed to remember that – was ending up on the chopping block by the end of this. She'd given me an excuse to see her head on a pike and she knew I would not allow it to pass me by. Which meant that, by the end of her play she intended to be beyond any sanctions I could inflict. Was she trying to carve out her own kingdom in southern Callow? That would be building on sand, she was hated there.

"All right," I finally said, still digesting the news. "Those two are covered. Now what's the rest?"

Juniper glanced at Ratface, who shrugged then cleared his throat.

"Duchess Kegan has put the Duchy of Daoine on war footing," he said. "She's mobilizing both her army and the Watch, and she's refused to explain why."

"Oh *come on*," I barked. "I already conceded Council authority doesn't extend to Daoine. What the Hells more does she think she's going to get by rebelling?"

"We don't think she's rebelling, not since last week anyway," Juniper said. "She's imprisoned Praesi in the duchy but she hasn't killed them and she hasn't declared war on the Empire."

"Deoraithe don't declare war," I replied flatly. "You realize there's a one going on when you're neck deep in Watch."

"I said the same thing, but then Robber returned from the south," Ratface said.

"Special Tribune Robber," Juniper sternly corrected.

Considering how much grief she'd given me over promoting the goblin, I was more than a little amused she was now insisting on the proper address. It wasn't that she'd disagreed that Robber with a detached cohort would bleed Akua's forces in the south, the orc was well aware of what the vicious little bastard could do. But removing an 'insubordinate wretch' like him from the usual chain of command and the supervision it entailed had not sat well with her. She was Legion to the bone, though: now that he had the position she wouldn't let anyone dismiss the respect it was supposed to carry. Not even Robber himself, much as he tried.

"Yes, Special Tribune Robber," Ratface said, barely refraining from rolling his eyes.

He was going to be paying for that later, by the look on the Hellhound's face.

"He broke into Liesse with a tenth," the Supply Tribune continued. "And found out the Diabolist has Deoraithe stashed below the Ducal Palace, at the centre of some sort of array."

I raised an eyebrow, reluctantly impressed.

"Her laboratory had to be a regular fortress," I said. "He managed to get through the wards?"

"Not exactly," Juniper growled.



"He ran into the Thief," Ratface said, eyeing me carefully.

"She was bound to turn up eventually," I sighed. "I'll get furious about her meddling when I can spare the time. So, captive Deoraithe and the Duchess mobilizing her troops. Might not be rebellion, then."

"We can't afford the risk that it is," Juniper said. "Marshal Ranker pulled the Twelfth Legion from Summerholm to reinforce her at Denier in case she needs to deny the crossing."

Ranker would be horribly outnumbered, I frowned. Eight thousand legionaries against what, a conservative estimate of twenty thousand at least a fourth of which was Watch? Ranker's Fourth Legion was heavy on the sappers, since the core of it had been raised from the tribe she'd once ruled over as Matron, but there was only so much preparation could do.

"Marshal Grem should be in charge," I said. "What has he been doing?"

"He deferred operational command," the Hellhound gravelled. "He's need in the Vales."

"Which brings us to our fourth problem," Ratface said. "The Principate is moving."

"Godsdamnit," I cursed. "Is there anyone who's *not* trying to invade us right now?"

There was pause.

"The Golden Bloom," the Taghreb said.

"Don't you bring the fucking elves into this, Ratface," I said. "We already have a net surplus of genocidal maniacs."

"The Tower's used the emergency channels to inform everyone of general rank or higher that the Golden Bloom is phasing out of Creation," Juniper told me.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Last time they did that was was when Triumphant was kicking around, right?" I moaned.

I ignored the twin 'may she never return' the other two spoke, while pressing their knuckles to their foreheads.

"That's not a no," I decided. "And just like that, Diabolist kicks up the priority list. Fucking Hells."

"Most likely, yes" Ratface grimly agreed.

"If One Eye's staying at the border, that means we have three full Legions sitting this out," I said.

The First, Tenth and Eleventh. Considering a dragon and a vampire ran the last two, I could at least find a silver lining in the fact that their absence would limit collateral damage. Two thirds of the Tenth Legion were undead mostly because General Catastrophe had the nasty habit of torching his own soldiers as well as the enemy. What that would do close to a major city I preferred not to think about.

"The Marshal has sent word he does not believe the Principate seriously intends to make an invasion attempt," the Hellhound said. "The two principalities at the border assembled their armies, but they don't have the men to breach the Vales."

"They're just acting up so our Legions can't leave," I grimaced. "We could call that bluff."

"We can't afford a slugging match with the First Prince when our own backyard's on fire, Cat," Ratface said. "She gets to have this one."

How lovely, that the old trend of Procer screwing over Callow continued no matter who was in charge of it. There were some permanent constants in Creation, like the Tower being a pile of horrors beyond human understand and the Principate always being run by a bunch of rapacious assholes. One of these days, Cordelia Hasenbach and I were going to sit down and have a nice little chat over the subject. Knives might be involved.

"So your mother's in charge of Imperial response, then," I said, eyes flicking to Juniper.

"General Istrid," the orc replied, galaring, "has seniority. She's currently mustering north of Vale. Her own Sixth Legion has been joined by General Sacker's Ninth already. The Fifth under General Orim is supposed to be joining them, but has been delayed."

Orim the Grim and his boys served as Laure's garrison, so I supposed we'd arrived to the part of the conversation where I was going to get *absolutely livid*.

"Tell me," I ordered.

Ratface swallowed loudly.

"Foundling," Juniper said. "Your shadow's moving. Cut it the Hells out. It's not the Supply Tribune's fault your Ruling Council collapsed."

Surprised, I glanced behind me and found my shadow still as it should be. I raised an eyebrow. Juniper wasn't the type to exaggerate, so I'd take her word for it.

"Sorry, Ratface," I said. "Picked up something in Arcadia, it's making my Name act up."

The Hellhound's eyes narrowed.

"Is that why you've turned into a botched weather ritual?" she asked. "Learn to control it before we march. If you can make ice at will it has useful implications for our supply train."

Only Juniper, I mused, would respond to my usurping a part of Winter by trying to make me into the Fifteenth's personal magic coldbox. I coughed to hide my amusement.

"I'll get right on it, General," I said. "Tell me about Laure, Supply Tribune."

"Approximately two weeks after you disappeared into Arcadia," Ratface said, "Murad Kalbid and Satang Motherless executed a coup in the capital."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. I'd tried, I *had*, to involved Praesi in ruling Callow. I'd held up my part of the deal I'd struck with the High Lords on the Empress' side. I should have remembered that even if they were Malicia's tigers, they were still fucking tigers. They'd always strike when they smelled weakness.

"And they succeeded?" I asked, eyes still closed.

"The two Callowan members of the Council are gone," the dark-eyed man said. "Sister Abigail was killed in broad daylight, allegedly by members of the Guild of Assassins. Baroness Kendal was wounded, but she managed to flee and no body was found."

I opened my eyes.

"Her Dread Majesty's representative?" I prompted.

"Disappeared," Ratface said. "If anyone knows where, they're not telling. The usurpers are turning over every rock in Laure looking for her so it's probably not their doing."

"Oh, they're not going to be finding that woman anytime soon," I murmured. "So they murdered their way to the top, like good little Wastelanders. Then they declared martial law?"

"Across all of Callow," Ratface agreed. "There's been rioting in every major city as a consequence."

I cursed in Kharsum, which had the Hellhound frowning. She kept telling me my accent was horrible, more offended by that than the rough language.

"How bad?"

"Bad enough General Istrid is mustering outside Vale because she believes if she tries entering the city she'll have to take it by force," Juniper said.

"The governors you appointed, the Callowans," Ratface said. "They're denouncing the current Council as illegitimate and refuse to answer to Imperial authorities until you 'restore order'."

"They weren't sure I would come back," I groaned.

"Neither were the usurpers," Ratface said. "They took a risk by making their move."

I chewed over that for a while.

"Why's Orim stuck in Laure?" I asked. "Those two are treacherous pricks, but they aren't idiots – after the initial riot they should have lined the pocket of the Guilds to calm things down in the city."

"They don't have the treasury," the dark-haired man said, sounding amused. "When they tried to take it they found the vaults empty."

"Then who the Hells has it?" I asked.

"Guild of Thieves," Juniper informed me. "They left a note."

"They have to know they're declaring war on me by doing that," I frowned.

"Special Tribune Robber found the source of their courage in Liesse," Ratface said.

I blinked. Before I'd left, he'd told me that the Guild was under new management: a new King of Thieves had taken their reins. No, not a king – a queen.

"Thief," I hissed. "The Thief did this. She runs them now?"

"As far as we can tell," Ratface said. "She, uh, passed a message through the Special Tribune. If you have an issue with what she's been doing, you can take it up with her in Laure."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"You're leaving something out," I said.

"She was rather unpleasant about the phrasing," the Supply Tribune replied frankly.

I decided not to push. I was pissed enough as was and more anger wasn't going to make me think any clearer. I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes again, thinking this through. I had six months to either break the Summer Court or force a peace settlement on them. I hated the thought of giving Akua any longer to prepare, but bloodying my army on the walls of Liesse when there were still flame-happy demigods wandering the countryside would be a major blunder. I couldn't just march the Fifteen south, though. I needed General Istrid's army in the field, and they weren't moving until the Fifth Legion joined them. Juniper's mother was reckless but not even she would take on Summer with only eight thousand men. So that meant I had to clean up the mess in Laure before taking care of the rest. Opening my eyes, I set my hands on the table.

"I'll need Nauk and his men ready to march," I told Juniper. "And Robber's cohort. Laure takes priority for now."

"We'd be thinning the defences around the portal," the Hellhound said.

"We're emptying them," I said. "Winter's dealt with, at the moment. I bought us at least six months until anything goes down."

Six times the coming of my title, the King of Winter had said. Overly dramatic phrasing but at least I had a number.

"Then the rest of the Fifteenth be moving as well," Juniper said.

"Six months, Hellhound, is also our timetable for wrecking Summer," I said. "I hope you've been thinking about ways to kill fae."

"Oh, Foundling," the orc replied happily, baring her teeth. "I have been thinking of precious little else."

I was not too proud to admit to myself that Juniper scared me a little, sometimes.

"Give Nauk two thousand men," I told her after a moment. "That should be more than enough. That leaves you a little over full legion to work with, no?"

"More," my general replied. "As of yesterday's census, the Fifteenth Legion now numbers eight thousand soldiers."

I blinked.

"What?" I spluttered.

"The south is literally on fire, Cat," Ratface said. "And we have a reputation for both taking in Callowan soldiers and killing anything that invades the region. We've had a lot of recruits pouring in."

"As well as some less desirable individuals," Juniper added coldly. "The nephew of the defunct Countess of Marchford showed up last month."

I raised an eyebrow.

"He tried to take back the city when it was under fae siege and occupied by what's pretty much two full legions?"

Nobility wasn't as inbred in Callow as it was in the Principate, so that level of blatant idiocy was a little surprising.

"He's renounced his claim on Marchford publicly, actually," Ratface said. "Says he wants an audience with you, won't talk to anyone else."

"He's in a cell," the Hellhound said. "I've no patience for agitators."

"I'll look into it," I said.

Another thing for the list. There either needed to be more hours in a day or I needed to find a way to get rid of sleep entirely.

"We'll have a more formal meeting to plan our operations, but get Nauk ready to go as soon as possible," I said, rising to my feet.

I made to leave, but turned when Juniper called out.

"Foundling."

I met her eyes.

"Catherine," she said, more softly. "What happened in Arcadia?"

"You'll get the whole story when everyone's there," I said. "But in short? I fucked up. The Winter King was playing me before I ever stepped foot in there."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Doesn't matter," I finally added. "I think I got what we need to win this war."

The hourglass had already been flipped and time was slipping away. What I'd thought I needed was more of it, but I might have found a way around the need. I was the Duchess of Moonless Nights, nowadays. And Apprentice had once told me that high-ranking fae could open portals both in and out of Arcadia.

## Chapter 17: Allegiance

*"There's a natural hierarchy to the world, Chancellor: there's me, then my boot, then all of Creation under the boot."*

– Dread Empress Regalia

It felt good to be back in plate. It felt even better to know that I'd be facing opponents that could actually be deterred by armour – no more of this 'fae blades cut through everything' bullshit. It'd been like fighting a hundred less competent version of the Lone Swordsman, though admittedly with much less lecturing thrown around. Small favours. My cloaks swirled behind me as I walked down the stairs, the most recent addition to it glimmering even in the dark. How Hakram had managed to get his hands on a piece of the Duke of Violent Squalls' clothes I had no idea, but the wind-like cloth had been added as another mark of victory to my name. A third of the black cloth was now covered by stolen banners of dead men. *How many years, before there is no black left?* At the rate I was making enemies, not many. If I survived the year, odds were Akua Sahelian's would be joining the lot. There was a thought to warm my absent heart.

It was cooler, underground. There'd been two sets of goals in Marchford, before I'd taken the city back in the rebellion. The cells for petty criminals, near the centre of the city: the ones I was currently in. The other had been for highborn prisoners, in a wing of the Countess of Marchford's manner. The very same I'd had Robber put to the torch purely to piss then-Heiress off. If I'd known back then I'd have to pay for rebuilding the godsdamned thing, I might have held off. The awareness that I'd ordered that manor burned followed me into the dark. The man I was visiting, after all, had once called that seat of power his birthright. Elizabeth Talbot did not have any children, but she had a whole tribe of relatives. Her designated heir was her brother's son, Lord Brandon Talbot – who'd been among the rebels broken by Black but had managed to escape and survive.

From the fact that his head had not ended up on a pike in the following months, I assumed neither my teacher nor Malicia had thought him worth the effort of hunting down. With that in mind I'd expected to find a living example of every noble wastrel tale waiting down in his cell, but the reality was different. Brandon Talbot was a man in his early thirties, powerfully built with a thick beard and long hair held in a ponytail much like mine. He was seated on a stone bench in the back, managing to make the position look almost dignified even if his well-tailored clothes had obviously not been washed in some time.

"I was beginning to think I'd been forgotten down here," the man said.

"No such luck," I replied.

I glanced around. There was a table and seats meant for guards, under a pair of torches, and I claimed one of the chars. Turning its back to the prisoner, I straddled it and propped up my elbows atop it. He was staring at me, I saw, a strange expression on his face.

"Taking a good look?" I said.

He blinked, then shook his head.

"I mean, I'd heard," he said. "But it's another thing to see it. You're so *young*."

I hid my surprise. Usually, at this point, my enemies offered up banter. Or a denunciation of some sort. Maybe a dig at my height, which made stabbing them afterwards a sort of justice.

"Age stops mattering, when you become Named," I said.

"Age always matters," he disagreed softly. "There was a time this country didn't make soldiers of its children."

I smiled thinly.

"And then we lost," I said. "A lesson learned."

"Of all the things we lost back then," Brandon Talbot murmured, "I think I might grieve that one the most."

"Is that why you came here?" I asked. "To tell me of the past glories of the Kingdom?"

"The Kingdom died," he said, tone sad. "Once on the Fields of Streges, and again when the Carrion Lord snuffed out the dream last year."

"It was not a Callowan dream," I replied harshly. "It was a Proceran one, bought with the First Prince's silver."

"Oh we all knew that, deep down," Lord Brandon admitted. "That we were being used. But we glimpsed a world that was more than waking up every morning with the Tower's boot on our throat. It was not a bad dream, Countess Foundling."

"Lady," I corrected. "*Lady* Foundling."

He peered at me, dark bangs and darker shadows framing his face.

"Are you really?" he asked.

"To you?" I said. "Yes."

The man laughed.



"You think I'm your enemy," he said.

"I think you committed treason," I said. "I've hanged men for less."

"And yet here I am," Lord Brandon said. "Without a rope around my neck."

I smiled mirthlessly.

"It would be a very grave mistake," I said, "to confuse curiosity for mercy."

"But you *are* curious," he said. "Most would have sent me to the gallows without even an audience. Your orc certainly wanted to."

"General Juniper would have been well within her rights to give you a traitor's death," I replied harshly.

"I'm not trying to speak ill of your friend, Countess Foundling," he said, waving away the notion.

Blue eyes considered me carefully.

"She *is* your friend, yes?"

"Something like that," I said.

"And yet they say you fight for Callow," Lord Brandon mused. "Most would think those two things irreconcilable."

"But not you?" I snorted. "If you're looking for a pardon for that concession, you're knocking at the wrong door. I'm eighteen, not an idiot."

He did not entirely manage to hide his surprise when I mentioned my age. Oh fuck him, I thought. I wasn't *that* short. I'd been almost an inch taller than Black before he left, it wasn't my fault I was surrounded by godsdamned giants all the time.

"What do you want, Lord Talbot?" I said. "You had to know you'd end up in a cell if you turned up here."

"I want you to save Callow," he said. "While there's still some of it left to save."

"Always the cry of the highborn, isn't it?" I laughed, darkly amused. "Bring it back the way it used to be! When everything was perfect because we were rich and powerful and we ran the fucking show."

"This land was at peace, once," he said.

"I keep hearing people talk about bringing back the Kingdom," I said. "Like putting a crown on some Fairfax relative would magically fix this fucking country. You all act like everything was perfect before the Conquest, like it was some never-ending golden age. It wasn't. I've read the records, and what you're trying to resurrect never existed. All a rebellion won would accomplish is slapping a fresh coat of ruin over a bitter truth: all that's changed is whose palace the taxes build."

"If you hold us in such contempt," he said, "why claim to fight for us?"

"Because there's a difference between Callow and the Kingdom," I hissed. "One is *people*. The other's gilding. People I'll draw my sword for, every time. The rest can burn. It's not worth a single drop of godsdamned blood."

"The people are dying, Countess," Lord Brandon said.

"So they are," I conceded tiredly. "And so I go to war again."

"I don't mean the fae," the noble said, shaking his head. "Or even the butcher you gave Liesse to. *Callow* is dying. Our way of life. Another fifty years of this and we'll be light-skinned Praesi, save for a few bitter enclaves."

I didn't reply, because he was right. I knew he was, and worst of all I didn't have a solution. Because the monsters were as cunning as they were powerful, and they had been playing this game since before I was born. Winning it through schools and trade and the featherweight of apathy. It was one of the first thing Black had ever told me: he didn't need people to agree, just not to care. And it was working, wasn't it? During the Liesse Rebellion, no holding north of Vale has risen. So few soldiers had answered the Duke's call that he'd needed to bolster his forces with mercenaries. The dream the noble said my teacher has snuffed out had been a feeble thing from the start: peasant levies ordered into the field, barely held together by household troops and foreign soldiery. And before the war was done those same levies had delivered the same nobles who'd called on them at the feet of Black, bound in chains. Fear, I knew, had driven them there. But also more than that: no one in that army had really believed they could win anymore. Some hadn't even been sure they should.

"I know," I admitted.

"But this is not your design," Lord Brandon pressed, leaning forward.

His eyes were alight, almost fervent.

"I'm trying to find a path between destruction and rebellion," I said.

"The let us be Callowans," he said. "Changed, perhaps, but still us. There is still a spine under the boot, Countess. There's still a flicker of the flame no matter how many times they stamp it out."

"Those are pretty words," I noted. "I don't trust pretty words, Talbot. I trust practical measures. Tangible things I can work with."

"Bring back the knightly orders," he said.

I stared at him for a long moment. The knights of Callow, huh? Even over twenty years after the Conquest, their silhouettes were still branded behind the eyes of children who'd been born long after the last of them were disbanded. For a lot of people, the knights *were* Callow, just as much as the bells of Laure or golden fields spreading as far as they eye could see. They were also a basketful of military orders disbanded by order of the Dread Empress because they were a direct threat to Praesi hegemony.

"I don't have the authority to repeal Tower decrees," I said.

"Not lawfully," the noble said very, very quietly.

It still rang loudly, in these rooms empty save for the two of us. Treason had a way of doing that. I looked at him, and finally understood what I was sitting across from.

"You're not an agitator," I said. "You're an *envoy*."

"So I am," he agreed softly. "We've watched you, Countess. Seen what you preach more than empty words."

I'd been playing this game for too long to be fooled by flattery.

"Don't lie to me," I said. "You're not coming to be because you think I'm worthy. You're coming to me because you're *desperate*. Because in fifty years, we'll be light-skinned Praesi – and if I die, you're not getting another Squire who gives a shit about Callow."

He did not deny it. I allowed myself to see it, for just a moment. Knights come again, and this time on my side. Not riding down my legionaries. With Summer and the Diabolist ahead of me, the thought was horribly tempting.

"How many?" I said, mouth gone dry.

"You have not agreed," Lord Brandon grimaced. "You must understand that-"

"You're asking me to cross Dread Empress Malicia," I said, tone like steel. "If you think you grasp even a fraction of how dangerous that woman really is, you're a fucking fool. *How many?*"

The man studied me in silence for a long time.

"Two thousand," he said. "More may emerge if you don't butcher us in our sleep."

Two thousand. Gods be good.

"The Duke of Liesse didn't even have that much horse," I said faintly. "And Black had most his knights killed in their sleep."

"Those of us that rose with Gaston of Liesse went to die, Foundling," the noble murmured. "Reaching for that dream, one last time. It was the old, the tired, the despairing. The rest of us stayed hidden. To teach old ways to the young, and wait."

*Half the houses in the city will have swords and spears stashed under the floorboards or hidden away in the attic, I'd told Juniper the first night we spent in Marchford. Because this was Callow. Because we'd carry a grudge for ten generations, if that was how long it took to even the scales. Because those who wronged us always, always paid the long price no matter what it cost is. And now I'd just been told that two thousand knights were hiding in the countryside, biding their time. Under Black's nose, for years. Pride in my countrymen warred with horror at the thought of what could have happened, if they'd all risen. Praesi thought they knew about patience but they'd only been invaded the once, and not like us. We've had wolves at the gate since the First Dawn. It taught us hard lessons and oh, look how well we've learned them.* I was more moved by the thought than I cared to admit.

"How quickly can you gather them?" I croaked.

Lord Brandon kept his face calm, but his eyes betrayed him.

"Two, maybe three months," he said.

"You'll be part of the Fifteenth," I said. "Under General Juniper. Anything less is declaring war on the Tower."

"It is a lesser yoke," the dark-haired man said, "than the one currently choking us."

I rose to my feet, feeling faint. I could feel the Beast's head leaning over my shoulder, its warm breath heating my cheek. It was grinning.

"I, Countess Catherine Foundling of Marchford," I said, "do order the creation of the Order of Broken Bells and charge Lord Brandon Talbot with gathering men under its banner."

The man looked about to weep, and softly nodded.

"You'll be out within the hour," I said. "Get me knights, Talbot. Before it's too late."

—

"I don't like this," Juniper said.

It was almost noon. Leaving the orc to hover behind me, I put a hand against the glass and tried to feel warmth. Nothing. I was so cold to the touch these days that my breath should come as vapour. I stared at the sun and idly thought that the conversation that I was about to have would have better fit the night.

"Are you listening, Foundling?" the general growled. "I don't fucking like it, this *inner circle* shit. We're a legion, not a gang. Officers of the same rank get the same briefings."

"What I have to say isn't for everybody's ears," I said.

"Hune should be there," the grim-faced orc continued as if she hadn't heard me. "She's my second, not Nauk."

"I trust Nauk," I replied without turning. "Hune is a blank slate."

"Then have one of your little talks with her," the general said. "Like you did with Ratface and Aisha."

I snorted.

"Jealous we never had one?" I teased, sounding more light-hearted than I felt.

"Please," she dismissed. "I already see too much of you as is. Couldn't stomach more."

Before I could summon up a reply, my 'inner circle' began piling in. They'd come as a group, it seemed. Only officers for this one: Masego was holed up in his tower, seeing to the experiments he'd left in the hands of the assistant he's stolen from Diabolist, and Hakram was keeping Archer busy in the sparring yard. Leaving her to her own devices would just lead to more property damage I couldn't afford to repair. Nauk was the first in, from the sound of the steps. Robber and Ratface came in bickering about 'misappropriation of Legion resources', which I'd probably have to look into at some point, and Aisha's presence could be deduced from the dainty sigh that followed them. Pickler was light-footed and silent, but my ears were more than mortal now. Kilian wasn't here. I owed it to her to tell her when it was just the two of us.

"Boss," Robber called out. "Do I not even get a 'good murdering, you filthy goblin'? I really feel like I've earned it."

"The filthy in particular," Aisha commented.

I turned to look at the officer's I'd had at my side since the College, who'd followed me through a rebellion of my own making and bled in my name. I did not manage to smile.

"Oh *shit*," Ratface cursed.

He'd always been a perceptive man.

"About an hour ago," I said, "I committed treason."

There was a heartbeat of shocked silence, then the room exploded. Aisha's face had gone blank, Juniper looked furious and Pickler somehow managed to be bored in the face of a blunt admission of sedition. Nauk was grinning and thumping the table. Ratface's face was darkly pleased and the noise covering all the rest was Robber's loud, shrill laughter.

"If I may request specifics, Lady Catherine?" Aisha politely asked.

Well, I wasn't back to Lady Foundling or Lady Squire. That was something.

"Yes, Foundling," the Hellhound barked. "Tell us more about the *forveala'sak* treason."

I didn't know the Kharsum term she'd put in there, but by the look on Nauk's face it must have been truly filthy.

"I've founded a knightly order," I calmly said. "And released the former Countess' nephew to fill its ranks. I'm told we should have two thousand riders within three months."

Not a single hint of her thoughts touched Aisha's face. Ratface leaned forward, face eager.

"Are we rebelling?" he asked.

"You shut your fucking mouth," Juniper shouted. "We're not rebelling."

"Not unless the Tower forces me to," I replied frankly.

"Fingers crossed," Nauk laughed loudly, like I'd just handed him a bag of rubies.

"How many cousins and uncles do you have in the Legions, Nauk?" Aisha asked him, tone emotionless. "Think for once in your life."

"Now," Juniper interrupted, turning to me. "*Now* you choose to pull this shit, when the horde is at the gate."

"That is the best time to pull something like this," Pickler clinically said. "The Tower can't afford to antagonize us. Not if it wants to hold Callow."

"So we're going rogue," Robber grinned malevolently. "About time. I was getting tired of playing nice."

"I will not see the Fifteenth turn on the Empire while I breathe," Juniper said and her voice was like bedstone.

That killed every smile in the room. There was no longer any anger in her voice, I heard. She was beyond that now. She was looking at me and I'd ever only seen her with eyes that cold when she was thinking of how to destroy an enemy. I'd learn to read orcs, since my days in the College, but even if I hadn't I'd know exactly what I saw on her face: betrayed. She felt betrayed, by someone she'd thought a friend.

"Juniper," Aisha spoke softly into the silence. "Listen to her. Don't assume."

The Hellhound shook her head.

"Is that what this has all been leading to, Catherine?" she asked, and the genuine grief in her voice tone cut me like a knife. "Recruiting Callowans. Subverting officers. Gathering Named Were you trying to ease us into treason before we ever began?"

Her voice shook.

"Was it just so you could carve yourself a kingdom?"

"Hellhound," Nauk said, and for once his voice was soft. "We all knew this was coming. From the beginning."

"Not like this," Juniper said. "Not like this."

"I'm not rebelling," I told her, meeting her eyes. "I'm not asking you to fight your mother, Juniper. Or you your family, Aisha. But things can't continue as they've gone on. Not anymore. Not after all the lines they've crossed."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Gods, why did I have to feel so cold? My gaze swept across the room.

"There's something sick in the Empire," I said. "You've all seen it. Some of you have felt it first-hand. Merciless Gods, the people ruling the Wasteland think half the people in this room are *cattle*."

"And you think raising a banner will change that?" Pickler said, eyes hooded. "You're good at killing, Foundling, but you can't kill a thousand years of hatred. Your sword is of no use there."

"If the people in power can't even stop killing their own," I said quietly, "why are they still in power?"

I felt the shiver go through the room. Was this what William had felt like, when he'd first spoken to his rebels behind barred doors and shuttered windows? That weight, power and responsibility both. It would kill me, if I was not careful, like it had killed him.

"We've taken oaths," Juniper said. "All of us, and *you too*."

"Yes," I agreed. "I swore. To the Legions. To what Praes says it is."

I stared her down.

"Do you think the High Lords live up to those oaths?" I asked. "I look south, and I see the highest among them rebelling for the second time in two years. Twice she's walked away with a warning, free to bleed us again. How many of us do they get to kill before we say *enough*?"

"They'll never stop," Ratface whispered fervently, addressing everyone and no one at all. "You know that. They'll never stop unless we *make* them."

"And how many people will die, for that better world?" Aisha asked quietly.

"Mountains," I replied. "But for once, it won't be us doing the dying."

The beautiful Taghreb closed her eyes, let out a deep breath.

"Emperors rise," she said. "Emperors fall. The Tower endures. Gods forgive me, the Tower endures."

I did not allow myself to feel joy. This wasn't over yet.

"Beautiful things, ideals," Pickler said. "But I'm a goblin, Foundling. You can't eat principles. You can't carve a tunnel with them. They don't win wars."

Robber let out a whisper of a laugh, and my eyes immediately went to him. I'd never heard him a noise anything like it in all the time I'd known him. It had sounded, I thought, almost wistful.

"They kill us," the Special Tribune smiled, "for sport."

Pickler turned to face him, face flickering with dismay.



"Robber-"

"Listen to me, Pickler," Robber said. "No, actually *listen* for once. The Matrons, the High Lords, the whole fucking lot of them. They've had the crown for centuries. They're fat, now. Lazy. *They think they own it*. You know what that means. You're a goblin, right? They don't get to play if they're not willing to bleed."

"We can't win this. We can't beat them," Pickler hissed angrily, but her voice broke after. "I will not let us die doing the right thing. We are going to *grow old*, all of us. I will not – I don't-"

"We can," I said softly. "You know that already. It's what scares you. No shame in that. I know what's ahead better than any of you, and I'm terrified. It'll be blood and mud and grief, but don't think for a moment we can't do it."

The Senior Sapper took her hands off the table brusquely, to hide their shaking.

"It'll be to the death, Foundling," she said, amber eyes flicking away. "To the death. Do not start this lightly."

She sagged in her seat afterwards. Ratface's eyes sought mine and he chuckled.

"I always thought I'd die railing at them, you know," he said conversationally. "Just another corpse for the pile."

He paused, body shaking with nervous energy.

"I was brought into this war when they tried to murder me in my bed," he said. "You never needed to ask."

My eyes went to Nauk, who'd gotten up to lean against the wall. His arms were clasped and there was something hungry in his gaze.

"To the end," he said, fangs bared. "I made my choice before I knew it was a choice, Callow. To the bitter fucking end."

And just like that, there was only one. Juniper was close, had been this whole time, but she'd not moved in a while. She came closer to me, spine straight but shoulders tight.

"Swear to me, Catherine," she said hoarsely. "Not my mother. Not any of them. That they won't be the enemy."

"I swear," I told her, and offered my arm.

For the second time in our lives, she took it.

"Warlord," she whispered, and it sounded like an oath.

It should have felt like a victory, I thought. All I felt was cold. Gods, all I felt was cold.

## Chapter 18: Crack

*"Kingdoms don't die on battlefields. They die in dark, quiet rooms where deals are made between those who should know better."*  
– King Edward Alban of Callow, best known for annexing the Kingdom of Liesse

Masego's mage tower did not even attempt to look like anything else. It was at least a hundred feet tall, for one, which was taller than some keeps I'd come across. But that alone could have been the work of masons. The moat surrounding it was a different story: twenty feet wide and circling the building, it held no water but instead pitch-black darkness. No bottom could be seen, and a few months back I'd dropped a stone to see if it would do anything. As far as I knew, it was still falling. Apprentice had been particularly cagey about telling me exactly where the Hells it led, if anywhere, but that was in part my own fault. I'd flatly forbidden him to proceed with his original notion, which had been to fill a normal moat with giant fire-breathing lizards. Not dragons, he'd been very insistent in telling me. They didn't have wings, and weren't nearly as large. But the idea of those things inevitably getting loose and either rampaging across Marchford or making a lair in one of the silver mines had led me to put my foot down.

He'd been very snippy about it.

There was a single stone arch leading across the moat to the dark iron gate in front, wide for two people at a time at most and bare of any railing. There was a reason I picked messengers that weren't faint of heart when trying to get in contact with him. I tread across carefully. The entire surface of the tower was covered in grey mosaics and leering carvings of obsidian, which he'd assured me were there for purely magical purposes. He'd thrown enough magic babble at me to justify that point that I was pretty sure that he just really liked how it looked. Being raised by a devil and a villain had let my friend to have some fairly specific tastes in architecture, sadly, which could be best described as 'nightmare trying to seem friendly and failing'. The iron gate was covered in runes, and there was no knocker. In the centre, an iron-cast wolf's head stood out from the surface and animated when I arrived. There was a devil bound inside, I knew, though Masego had tried to not say as much by referring to it as 'an entity from a secondary realm of existence'.

"A visitor," the wolf said. "Only the worthy may gain entrance here. To prove your wit, answer me this riddle-"

"Answer mine first," I replied flatly. "Who's going to find out if my punches can dent iron if they don't open right now?"

The wolf paused.

"That is now how this usually goes," it complained.

"I get that a lot," I smiled thinly.

"Your name is on the allowed list," it said. "You may enter."

There was a pause, then it added *uncouth barbarian* in a loud whisper. I flicked its eye out of spite even as a doorway opened on the surface, ignoring its yelp and string of curses. The lowest level of the tower was much like any entrance hall decorated by a Praesi with too much gold to waste, though there was one major difference. Namely, the winged tapir that was fleeing down the stairs with loud shrieks as a dark-skinned woman in robes ran after it. It'd been a while since I'd last seen Fadila Mbafeno. Once one of Akua's minions, I'd nearly killed her in Liesse before Masego intervened and said she was too talented a practitioner to waste. He'd extracted an oath from her to be safe she wouldn't turn, in the early days, though she'd since been freed of it. Those kinds of binding magical oaths caused some fairly vicious side-effects if allowed to linger for too long. There was a burst of blue light from the Soninke's hands and shining chains emerged from her sleeve, wrapping around the shrieking tapir and forcing its wings and feet to stop moving. She grunted in effort when dragging it back to her. I cleared my throat and had to admit I found the look of surprise and panic on her face when she realized I was here delightful.

"Fadila," I said. "Keeping busy, I see."

The winged tapir kept shrieking at the top of its lungs until she kicked it, at which point it moaned plaintively.

"Lady Squire," she said, panting. "Some of the specimens occasionally get... rowdy."

I snorted.

"First time I met Masego," I said, "he was catching a fire-breathing pig with wings."

I squinted at the tapir.

"That doesn't breathe fire, right?"

"He does not," Fadila replied, trying for poise. "Which has very interesting implications, considering the amount of sorcery he's been exposed to."

"I'm, uh, sure it does," I lied. "Masego should be expecting me."

"He's set up the scrying room on the second level," the Soninke said.

Oh, good. Then he'd found a way to get in contact with Black like I'd asked him. Apparently it was possible if we took advantage of the relay system the Empress used to receive my teacher's reports, but he'd told me piggybacking on that without killing some of the mages involved would require some finagling.

"You have fun with this abomination of nature, then," I said cheerfully, passing her by.

The tapir was licking her feet in what I gauged to be a gesture of appeasement, but she didn't seem moved by the offering. By the time I was nearing the second level the shrieking had started again. The door to the scrying room was already open, so I wasted no time in going. This wasn't the kind of place where it was healthy to wander, no matter what Apprentice insisted. The man in question was kneeling in front of a wall covered entirely by polished silver, the work so finely done it worked as a mirror. He muttered something under his breath and the silver shone for a heartbeat before dulling.

"Figured it out?" I asked.

Apprentice rose to his feet, brushing off his shoulder.

"If I shunt off enough of the Due into a dispersal ward, the weight shouldn't cascade," he told me.

"An obvious solution," I said, pretending I knew what any of that meant.

He eyed me sceptically but didn't bother to call me out.

"I can initiate the connection at any time," he said.

"Before you do that, we need a little chat," I said. "I don't want to keep you in the dark, so I'll just state it outright: I might have dabbled a bit in treason."

"Dabbled?" he said, frowning over his glasses.

"You know, dipped a toe in the treason pool," I said.

"I wish you would have told me beforehand," he replied. "Now I'll need to rework Marchford's ward pattern to be able to face advanced scrying rituals."

I cocked my head to the side.

"That's it?"

"Oh no, treason," he said in a mockingly high-pitched voice. "No villain has ever done such a thing before. All my extensive interest in Imperial politics is now put in danger."

I snorted.

"What's that voice supposed to even represent?" I asked.

"How little I care about any of this," he replied frankly. "I'm sure you'll find some compromise with Uncle Amadeus, and the Empress probably knew you were going to do this before the thought ever crossed your mind."

The bespectacled mage pressed his hand against the mirror-wall, spoke a word in the arcane tongue and idly made for the door.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he said. "I think one of the tapirs got loose."

"Stuff like this is why you don't get to have giant fire-breathing lizards," I called out.

"You have no standards, Squire," he complained one last time before closing the door behind him.

The wall had been pulsing this entire time, but with a silvery ring an image came into focus. Pale green eyes met mine as I leaned against a table. Black's brow rose in surprise.

"Catherine," he greeted me. "Masego tapped into the relays?"

"The technicalities went over my head, but yes," I said. "Hello, Black. It's been a while."

"It has," he agreed calmly. "I expect you've a reason for this. We'll have to rebuild the entire network now – this will have sent flares for anyone looking."

"This morning," I said, "I founded a chivalric order."

The pale man did not seem particularly surprised, though it was always hard to tell with him.

"I wondered if they'd get in touch with you," he said. "I assumed they already would have, if they were ever going to."

I blinked.

"You knew there were knights in hiding?"

He seemed amused.

"I am not without Eyes, even in the south," he said. "Though I can't say this strikes me as a wise decision. Making such a bold

move for a few hundred men in cavalry is inviting backlash for limited gain."

"Two thousand," I said quietly. "Likely more."

He wasn't openly shocked. He had too much control for that. But his face went blank, for a heartbeat, and that was the closest thing he'd ever show.

"I miscalculated," he said, and I could see his mind working furiously behind the calm. "No centralized organization – ah, relying on local support. Cells with no contact after the initial founding. Whoever came up with the notion is most likely dead by now. What a waste."

Only Black, I thought, would go within moments from realizing he'd been outsmarted to being saddened at the loss of such talent.

"I thought you'd be angrier," I said.

"Angry?" he mused. "You'll have folded them into the Fifteenth, if I'm not mistaken. You've obtained half a legions' worth of the finest heavy cavalry on Calernia for the Empire. Pleased would be closer to the truth, though doing this without Malicia's sanction will bring trouble."

I frowned.

"She wouldn't have given it," I said.

"Not without exacting concessions in exchange," he said. "Which you'll have to make anyway, unless you intend to wage ware on the Empire."

His eyes narrowed a fraction as he studied me.

"If that is your intent, giving me prior warning was a mistake," he said.

"I don't want to fight you," I confessed. "But I don't think you'll like what I'm about to do."

"You know where I draw the line," he reminded me.

"I'm not going to oversee the eradication of my own people's culture, Black," I said.

"Then don't," the dark-haired man frowned. "I take no issue with Callowans having a way of life, only the aspects of it that threaten Imperial control."

"Imperial control is what got us here in the first place," I flatly replied.

"An independent Callow is not feasible," he said carefully. "You know this."

"I know," I said. "But if this is going to work, there's going to be a need for heads on spikes. The rot needs to be cut out or we'll be here again in five years."

"You've more immediate threats to deal with than the Wasteland," he said after a moment.

He was not disagreeing with me and it was enough to have me shiver. He'd told me, once, that after the civil war that saw Malicia crowned he'd wanted to get rid of the Wastelands' nobility. It was the Empress who'd stopped him. I wouldn't be going that far, but – *he was not disagreeing with me.*

"I do," I said. "But after..."

"After," he agreed softly. "When I return."

His image on the wall turned and I heard someone speak to him.

"Then block it," Black said. "Before they can-"

The mirror-wall dulled, my teacher's profile disappearing without warning and leaving only my face looking back at me. I breathed out slowly. So I wasn't burning this bridge by doing what I intended to. Relief flooded me as I closed my eyes. I stayed there for a moment, and eventually I thought back to an evening long ago, on a balcony where a storm was gathering. I'd asked Black a question, back then and I could still hear his reply like he'd just spoken it. *When they get in your way? Step on them.*

Of all the lessons he'd taught me, I thought, I had learned that one best.

—

"So are you going to tell me why you made sure I wouldn't be at that meeting?" Kilian asked.

We'd come to share a wineskin by the ruins of had once been Marchford Manor, the blackened remains swept away months ago by Pickler's sappers. Rain and wind had scattered the ashes, leaving behind only the remains of the garden and the gaggle of statues that had filled it. The two of us were seated on a scorched stone bench, its once-elaborate carvings now hidden by soot. I passed her the wineskin and watched my lover drink from the Vale summer wine. Night had just fallen, the moon slowly climbing to its apex. I hesitated for a moment, then forged on.

"I've gone against the Empress," I said.

The quarter-fae was lovely, in the shade. Her red hair had grown long enough it bordered the limit of what was acceptable by Legions regulation, framing her pale face and hazelnut eyes like a tongue of flame. Kilian set down the wineskin after a moment.

"The noble Juniper put in a cell," she finally said. "He talked you into something."

"I've been headed there, I think," I said, "since the moment I learned there was a coup in Laure."

"There will be consequences to that," the redhead softly said.

"There would be consequences to doing nothing," I replied. "I chose the ones I could live with."

She remained silent for a long time. I could feel her, now, in a way that I previously could not. The bundle of power inside of me sang out when it came closer to the smaller sister-thing inside her. I no longer needed to hear or see her to know when she was in a room.

"You've never been very good at compromise," Kilian said.

I frowned.

"I've done almost nothing but for the last two years," I replied.

"You compromise," the lovely mage said, "when the other is stronger. And you are no longer powerless."

"I'm not sure what you're saying," I admitted.

She smiled gently at me.

"Why did you not tell me with the others?" she asked.

"I thought I owed it to you for it to be just the two of us," I said.

She drank another mouthful of wine, then passed me the skin.

"Catherine," she said. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not-"

"You didn't want me in that room," Kilian said calmly, "because if I left you over this, you didn't want it to happen in front of the others."

I very nearly denied that. But instead I took the wineskin and drank.

"The thought might have crossed my mind," I said.



"I'm not sure whether I should take that as a kindness or an insult," she murmured, looking up.

It'd been a long time since I'd last felt without so much as a speck of control over a conversation. I hadn't missed the feeling.

"When we started this," Kilian said. "I knew I'd always be third in line. Behind Callow, behind the the Fifteenth. On a good day, if duties allowed, I might wiggle up to second. But not often."

I felt my stomach knot.

"Kilian, I know we haven't spent a lot of time together lately. I've not been able to—"

She leaned into me and pressed a kiss against my shoulder.

"I'm not angry about it, Cat," she said. "I just told you, I knew that from the start. But you're leaving me behind. That's just a fact."

"I'm not," I insisted.

"I have fae blood," she said. "But you took two people into Arcadia, and I wasn't one of them."

"Kilian, it was *dangerous*," I said. "The kind of things I do in places like that, the kind of risks I take, they're..."

"Too much for me," she finished after I hesitated. "Because I'm weak."

"You're one of the best mages in the Fifteenth," I said.

She chuckled wearily.

"And what does that matter, when you have the Apprentice at your side?" she said.

"I don't share a bed with Masego, for one," I sharply replied.

"Is that what I'm to be remembered as, then?" Kilian said. "The girl who warmed your bed on your way to power?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it," I said. "I *trust* you."

Her eyes met mine.

"Then why wasn't I in that room?"

I looked away first.

"Just because I was afraid doesn't mean I don't trust you," I said. "I've told you things I've never told anyone before, Kilian."

"And I love you for that," the redhead smiled. "Even though it's stupid and dangerous and it might just get me killed."

The rush that came with her saying those words had never dimmed and I gloried in it for a moment. But then the smile went away.

"But now I think of the conversation you had with them, earlier," she said. "And I know you made a decision. You needed to convince all of them, and there was a risk I could distract from that effort. So you made the call."

She sighed.

"You know, I think the better part of everyone you love in this world was in that room," she mused. "And you manipulated them anyway. I don't believe you had that in you, when we first met."

*You're wrong, I thought. I'd just never had a reason to use it.*

"I'm glad you do now," she murmured. "We'll need it to survive the coming months. But I have to think of myself too."

"I thought you were happy," I murmured. "With us, with-"

*Me, I left unsaid.*

"I am," she said, laying a hand on my cheek. "But you're leaving me behind, Cat. And the kind of things I would have to do to catch up would end us anyway."

"I don't believe that," I said.

"As long as I don't control my blood," she said, "My magic is shackled."

"Masego could find a way," I said.

"He already has," she replied. "It's an old ritual. It requires sacrifice, and would make me as a full-fledged fae."

"Kilian, I'd put half of Winter on an altar if it helped you," I honestly said.

"It would require humans as a stabilizing element," she added quietly.

My heart skipped a beat.

"You can't seriously be considering that," I said.

"It could all be done lawfully," she said. "It would be costly to buy the death row prisoners, but demand has lessened and I've the funds for it."

"It's not about the law," I hissed. "It's about *decency*. They're people, not things."

The redhead chuckled softly.

"You can take the girl out of Callow," she said. "But not Callow out of the girl."

"You're Duni," I said.

As good as Callowan, in most Wastelanders' eyes.

"*They* make that distinction, not me," Kilian said, tone hardening as she withdrew her hand. "I am Praesi, Catherine. It's not any more a crime for me to love my home than you yours."

"This isn't about where we're from," I replied, aghast. "It's about *human sacrifice*."

"And how many of us will die so you can make what you want out of Callow?" she said tiredly. "I don't see much of a difference. At least it's strangers I would be using."

"There is," I started, but stopped when she lay a hand on my shoulder.

"I don't want to have this fight, Cat," she said. "If I did I would have brought up the notion when I first learned of it. I'll just say this: if there's anyone who should be able to understand how hateful it is to have a yoke around your neck, it's you. To just be... less than you could be."

"There's lines you can't uncross," I said.

"And how many of those have you left behind?" she replied quietly, rising to her feet.

My stomach dropped.

"That's it?" I said. "Just like that you're leaving me?"

*Because I won't condone bleeding people like animals*, I bit down on. Kilian's face was hard to read in the dark, but there was no joy on it.

"No," she finally said. "But I need to think. About what compromises I'm willing to make to make you happy."

She passed a hand through her hair.

"I'll be sleeping in the barracks from now on," Kilian said.  
"Take care of yourself, Catherine. It only gets harder from here."

I watched her walk away in silence, and kept watching long after she was gone. Eventually I looked up at the moon, and wondered if I was even still capable of crying.

## Chapter 19: Order (Redux)

*"In the aftermath of a rebellion do not execute merely those who rebelled. Remove those that remained uncommitted as well, for any power not bound to you is a threat."*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

The gate opened into Fairfax Square.

A year ago, this plaza had been filled to the brim with people come from all over the north of Callow to see the Empress bestow her rewards upon the victors of the Liesse Rebellion. Now? It was night-empty, though that had as much to do with the hour of the night as Laure's recent... troubles. I'd thought about trying to open the portal directly into the Whitestone, since it was much closer to the palace, but ultimately decided against it. Even after experimenting with the power under Masego's guidance it was still a roll of the dice where I'd carve a way out into Creation: better to take the widest place I knew in the capital and limit the risks. As for the time, well, it was much easier for me to open gates when it was dark out. My title in Winter likely had something to do with it. Not that even darkness seemed to affect the hard limit I'd found to my power: I could only open a portal once a day before my body began to revolt against the amount of fae power coursing through my veins.

Pushing myself to a second opening had hurt enough I'd not tried for a third. Having most liquid in my body freeze might very well have killed me, if not for the healing power I'd stolen from a hero and Apprentice's immediate and panicked help. The coming of dawn seemed to wipe away the slate when it came to fae sorcery in my body, for some arcane reason, which was my most promising lead around the limitations so far. But given how dangerous toying with this power had turned out to be I was much more inclined to let Masego run the calculations in his tower than try more direct experimental methods. What I'd stolen in Winter, I had been forced to admit, was not without limits. No matter. It was still a massive advantage over all my opponents. Zombie the Second's hooves clacked against the stone as I emerged first from Arcadia into the deserted heart of Laure. Legionaries followed in good order, their armour touched with frost even with the furs they wore over it.

"Three days," Nauk said, striding to my side as his soldiers spread out. "*Three days*, Catherine."

My horse stirred uneasily as the presence of an orc so close, but I stroked his neck until he calmed. Even mounts raised with greenskins never got entirely accustomed to them: there was just something wrong about the way orcs smelled, apparently. Considering that anything that moved qualified as meat for the cookpots, according to the Clans, I couldn't really blame them.

"I don't think all our crossings will be so uneventful," I replied.

"I don't care if we have to fight a running battle every time," he laughed. "It was a month and half's journey, if we marched my people halfway to the grave. The Fifteenth's the fastest army in Creation now. Hells, we barely even need a supply train."

"The fastest inside the Empire, maybe," I said. "I wouldn't try to portal anywhere I haven't been before."

"The warlock's get said he'd be able to run the numbers for it," the orc legate said.

"Masego was raised by a vicious creature of pure Evil and also a devil," I said. "His definition of *safe* is a little skewed. I'm not using his model unless we get really desperate."

"So in a few months, then," Robber grinned.

I'd heard the goblin approach, for once. I was getting used to his skulking.

"You never know," I sighed. "We could get through a single year without drowning in the deep end."

"Just wouldn't be the Fifteenth if it we were fighting battles we're supposed to win," Nauk contributed.

That was so sadly true I didn't bother to deny it.

"Hakram?" I asked the Special Tribune.

"With the rear guard," he replied. "We've had some curious little bastards coming closer."

I grimaced. While no Winter fae had made contact my sentries had reported silhouettes in the distance keeping an eye on us. I doubted any of the big ones would bother to come in person, but until I knew whose underlings those scouts were I'd have to tread carefully. I might be a Duchess but I was a Duchess of *Winter*. As usual, the side I'd ended up on was the one known for vicious infighting. I watched the legionaries move into a defensive

formation across Fairfax Square and drummed my fingers against my saddle.

"Robber," I said. "Hunt me some rats. I want anyone aligned with a Dark Guild in my city in custody, and soon."

The goblin's eyes glinted malevolently in the dark.

"And if they don't want to come along?" he asked.

"You're operating under my authority," I replied. "Use whatever means you deem necessary."

The chuckling sound he made was so unpleasant it should have counted as a crime.

"You'll have them by sunup, Boss," he said, saluting so sloppily I barely recognized the gesture.

He whistled sharply as he trotted off, his merry pack of killers popping out from the ranks to assemble around him. They looked like ugly green imps, I thought as I watched them, but they acted more like a pack of wolves – clustering around the nastiest among them, eager to sink their teeth into something.

"General Orim will have the city under martial law," Nauk said. "That means patrols in the street."

"Adjutant will be handling the Fifth," I grunted.

In part because of all the men I had with me I trusted Hakram the most not to get into a pissing match with another legion, in part because he was *the Adjutant*. The importance of Hakram being the first orc Named in centuries had been piled on over by the messes we kept getting ourselves in, but it was no small thing. His kind looked at him with something like a worship, an old dream given new flesh. Orim the Grim was an orc of the Lesser Steppes: by my estimation, being faced with an orc with a Name instead of a Callowan girl with the skin tone of the enemy he'd spent half his life fighting would make him more apt to listen. My few past conversations with the man had been stilted, if polite, so there was no relationship to call on from my side. It was coming to regret, these days, that I'd not cultivated closer ties with the generals and marshals that served in Callowan territory. Having a better idea of the kind of people they were would have been useful in planning my actions.

The Gallowborne were the last to leave Arcadia and immediately they closed ranks around me. Tribune Farrier cast wary eyes around us, seeking out danger in the shadows. His inability to follow me in Arcadia had made him even more stubborn about my being accompanied at all times, which I hadn't thought was actually physically possible. Getting him to close the rear guard

had been like pulling out nails with my teeth. Hakram took the tenth that I'd put under his direct command years ago – Sergeant Tordis' men, though she was now a Lieutenant – and after offering me a nod from a distance headed west through the streets. The largest barracks in the city were close to the wall there, and that would be where General Orim had his headquarters. Hopefully he'd manage to handle that situation before it become a problem. I was, after all suddenly dumping almost two and a half thousand soldiers into a boiling pot that had already tipped over several times.

"Royal Palace?" Nauk said.

I nodded.

"Pass word down to your people," I said. "If they see any Praesi in this city that are not part of the Fifth, they are to put them under arrest."

"They won't like that," the broad orc said.

They weren't meant to.

"They get one chance to surrender peacefully," I said mildly. "If they resist? Kill them."

The legate grinned.

"Aye," he gravelled. "That we will."

Nauk's kabili of two thousand split into five groups of two cohorts, marching down the major avenues leading up to the Whitestone. The full cohort of Gallowborne remained around me as we took the centre of the formation with my legate's own four hundred in front of us. It wasn't long before we started getting attention. People peeked at us through shuttered windows, still too afraid to break curfew to come out. It was hard to read the mood of a city in the middle of the night, but *fear* was what I was getting. With the fake Ruling Council and the Fifth Legion openly at each other's throats, that was more than understandable. We encountered our first patrol a quarter hour in – drawn by ripples we were causing in the city, a pair of lines from the Fifth came to see what was happening. They ran into the leftmost wing of our formation but were sent straight to me for an explanation. The Soninke lieutenant in charge saluted hastily when she realized who she was dealing with.

"Ma'am," she greeted me. "Lieutenant Tomuka, Fifth Legion."

"Lieutenant," I replied pleasantly. "You may continue with your duties, though I believe you'll be recalled to the barracks soon. The Fifteenth is taking over."

"We, uh, weren't aware you were going to be coming, ma'am," the Soninke said. "Our scouting lines didn't report a force headed for the capital."

"They wouldn't have," I simply said. "Before you return to your patrol, I have a few questions for you."

"I'm at your disposal," she grimaced.

"The usurpers in the Royal Palace," I said. "How many men do they have at their disposal?"

"Five hundred, by our latest estimate," the lieutenant said. "They've barricaded upper Whitestone and forbid access to even legionaries."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And General Orim has allowed this?"

"The general says as long as they're holed up in the palace we won't have to put down any more riots," she replied frankly. "It's not worth making an issue about."

I leaned back on my saddle.

"Only five hundred, Nauk," I called out. "We go in hard."

Loud orcish laughter was my only response. I glanced down at the uneasy lieutenant.

"I'd suggest sending a runner to any patrols in the area," I told her. "Wouldn't want anybody caught in the crossfire."

"I'll kick that up the ladder, ma'am," the Soninke said noncommittally.

Oh well. It didn't particularly mind an audience, truth be told. It might remind General Orim exactly who he was dealing with, when we sat down to have a little chat.

"Dismissed, Lieutenant Tomuka," I said, spurring Zombie the Second ahead.

A single line of Gallowborne broke from formation to follow me as I headed for my legate. Even when surrounded by other legionaries they didn't feel I was quite protected enough, evidently. Nauk was in hushed conversation with one of his officers, a Taghreb with the marks of a commander on her armour.

"Nauk," I said, interrupting him. "Scout reports."

The orc turned to me after clasping his second-in-command on the shoulder.



"Three barricades," he said. "About a hundred people on each. We're assuming the rest will be inside the palace."

I hummed. It would be smarter to wait until we had some flanking positions before making an assault, but I wanted this done with as quickly as possible. These people were too unimportant for me to be able to spare much effort on them. I doubted the enemy had anything in their employ that would be able to handle an assault by legionaries, anyway.

"I'll take the central one with the Gallowborne," I said. "Staggered hit on the other two."

"You're hogging the good stuff, Cat," the orc complained.

"Well, this ought to make up for it," I said, "If they don't surrender, Legate, I want you to *make a point*."

"We flagging them as not citizens, then?" he pressed eagerly.

By Legion regulations, Imperial citizens – even those in rebellion – could not have their corpses eaten after death, unless their will specifically stated otherwise. Even at the height of the Liesse Rebellion, the people who'd taken up arms had qualified as citizens. The Tower, after all, claimed all of Callow as its own.

"By my authority as the acting head of the Ruling Council, I strip any hostile forces inside Laure of their citizenship," I replied after a moment.

That was a way to get my point across, sure enough. Corpses with their faces chewed off and missing limbs might well appal most of the city, but it would send a message to the High Lords: *fuck with Callow under my watch and I'll take the gloves off*. It was about time they started catching up to that truth. The Taghreb commander paled at my words, but she knew better than to comment. I glanced at Tribune Farrier.

"Muster your men, John," I ordered. "We're taking the lead."

"Gladly, Countess," he said, a hard look on his face.

Farrier had never thought much of Praes, and though he'd come to have a rough sort of camaraderie with the men and women of the Fifteenth his opinion of the Empire at large had taken a sharp nosedive when news of what had happened in Laure spread. He'd made it abundantly clear in the past that he followed *me*, not the Tower, and he'd not changed that stance by an inch in the months since that declaration. Nauk's cohort split to allow us passage and I led my personal retinue forward at a brisk pace. It wasn't long before we entered the pale facades and sprawling gardens of

the Whitestone, and from there it was only a matter of time before we ran into the barricade.

The Ruling Council's hirelings had picked a good spot. I'd give them that much. They'd propped up crates and carts between an iron fence surrounding a garden and the high wall of what must have once been a noble's compound. The avenue was narrower than most, and I could see from atop Zombie that even at this hour the barricade bristled with pikes and crossbowmen. The latter of those weapons was as clear an indication of the origin of the soldiers as the skin colours I could discern in the dark: Callowans and most other Calernian nations fielded bows, not crossbows. And certainly not the lever-action crossbows whose designs were the work of the goblins of Foramen's Imperial Forges. Household troops, then. Not mercenary pushovers. I set Zombie at a trot, gesturing for the Gallowborne to stay behind as I closed in on the barricade. I could see the enemy soldiers stirring, crossbows being brought to the fore.

"Disperse, citizen," a man's voice called out. "By order of the Ruling Council of Callow, this section of the city is closed off."

A Taghreb had risen atop a crate, and he'd been the one to speak. An older man, scarred and with a curved scimitar at his hip. He looked liked he could be Aisha's uncle, though one from the ugly side of the family.

"There is no Ruling Council," I said. "Only two Wastelanders who illegally seized power and botched it so badly they have to hide from rioters."

"General Orim acceded to our demands to stay out of this area," the man replied impatiently. "You will be written up for disobeying orders if you press us any further."

I snorted.

"Look at the symbol on the shields of the men behind me," I said. "Do they look like they're part of the Fifth?"

A golden noose on a field of red was what he'd find. My personal retinue had not existed for long but there were few people in Callow who wouldn't recognize their heraldry. They'd made something of an impression, in Marchford and Liesse.

"Gallowborne?" he said. "The Hells are you doing this far north? No matter. The Ruling Council passed a decree forbidding entrance into the city to any legion but the Fifth. Your presence here goes against the Tower's law. Your general should fuck off south to play with the fairies."

"If Juniper was in command, we wouldn't be talking," I said. "You'd be eating your third volley. But I'm a soft touch. You get a chance to surrender before I string you up above the city gates."

The Taghreb laughed.

"And who do you think you are, girl?"

Huh. It'd been a *while* since the last time someone hadn't recognized me. Or basically fed me a line just asking for a witty retort. If I'd been in a better mood, I might just have toyed with him a bit. I wasn't. I wasn't angry either, just... irritated. That I had to lose hours dealing with the greed and stupidity of short-sighted fools when I should have been dealing with the monsters torching my homeland.

"Countess Catherine Foundling of Marchford," I said. "The Squire."

"And I'm the fucking Empress," the Taghreb mocked. "I'm just hiding the tits under the—"

I called on my Name, forming a spear of shadows, but something... bled into it. The power I'd gotten from Winter, the one that had grown tendrils into my soul when I became the Duchess of Moonless Nights. I abandoned that working and turned my will to the enemy commander instead. Shadows coiled around his neck, coming into existence, and there was a sharp sound. His head popped off his body and fell to the ground where it shattered into shards of ice. Well, that was new. Not worth having my heart literally ripped from my chest for, but it would come in useful.

"I've got another half-dozen titles," I continued calmly. "I won't bother to list them out. Now that idiocy killed your commander, who's in charge?"

"*Fire*, you fools," a woman's voice hissed. "Before she kills us all."

"The hard way it is, then," I sighed. "GALLOWBORNE, FORWARD!"

I formed a panel of shadow in front of me to catch the crossbow bolts, frowning at how easy it was. It didn't take any less power than it had before, I noted as the steel-tipped projectiles thudded into the makeshift shield. The well was just deeper than it used to be, deeper than it *should* be in a transitional Name like mine. Weaker than the kind of power I'd felt in the Duke of Violent Squalls, but not by that much — and wasn't that a terrifying thought? That kind of a gain never came without a cost, and I wasn't sure what I'd be paying with. If I ended up losing my soul because of fae shenanigans, I was going to be *pissed*. I just knew that stealing it back would be horrendously

difficult, and I didn't have the time to spare to murder my way back into a semblance of humanity with all the other things going on. The enemy didn't bother shooting at me again after it was made abundantly clear they might as well be aiming at a wall, instead aiming their crossbows at the raised shields of my retinue.

I wasn't having any of that.

Dismissing the shield, I called on the power a third time. I'd shot bolts of shadow out of my hand before, and even learned how to strengthen or weaken them: this time I poured as much as I could into the working without it blowing up in my face, and loosed the projectile at the foot of the barricade's centre. The resulting explosion of wood and screams had me blink in surprise: I'd essentially pulverized three feet of barricade and assorted people with a gesture, and I wasn't even winded yet. *Yeah, definitely sitting down with Masego to have a talk about this.*

"Plug the gap!" the same woman's voice called out.

"Fire," Tribune Farrier's voice calmly ordered.

My own people's volley did little more damage than the sporadic fire they'd been subjected to – it was hard to hit a target holed up behind cover, even a panicking one – but it did what it had been meant to: suppress the enemy before the first rank hit them. I spurred Zombie forward into the gap I'd created, where the enemy was trying to form a line, and didn't even bother to call on my Name. My warhorse trampled his way through the fledgling formation and I spilled a man's brains on the ground with a measured stroke of my sword. There must have been ten soldiers around me, but they were tired and scared and facing a Named. Well all knew how it was going to end. Within heartbeats the Gallowborne were at my sides, methodically butchering their way through the Praesi troops. Pikes and crossbows were no match for veteran sword and board infantry like my retinue on the best of days, and even less since I'd taken to occasionally drilling them myself. The skirmish was quick and brutally one-sided, the back of the enemy formation beginning to run for it before the front even collapsed. I waited for us to have seized the barricade properly, then picked out Farrier from the crowd.

"Tribune," I said. "Send a runner to Nauk. The centre is secure. The Fifteenth is to advance on every front and converge on the Royal Palace. Leave a detachment behind for our wounded."

I glanced at the rest of my personal guard. They were not, by the looks of it, particularly thrilled by the victory. There'd been nothing to this fight but whimpers and dead men. Like the seasoned professionals they were, the Gallowborne went around finishing off the enemy wounded as the meat of the cohort resumed formation.

"The rest of you, with me," I said. "Let's get this over with."

I led and they followed. The outer gates to the Royal Palace were wide open, and its grounds freshly tread. Evidently the runners from our last engagement had made it here ahead of us. The gardens were similarly deserted but up ahead I could see where the remaining forces of the Ruling Council were waiting for us. Crossbows were peeking out of windows on both levels of the main hall and the large gates in front were closed. Probably barricaded from behind. I trotted up ahead again, and ignored the hesitant hail from a window to the left. Cloak streaming behind me, I guided Zombie to the bottom of the marble steps and stared at the massive bronze gates.

"Break," I said.

My Name flared even as the metal crumpled like parchment under my eyes, falling apart with a sound like a gong being struck. In the hall behind, two dozen soldiers stood shaking and pale.

"Surrender," I ordered. "I will not tell you twice."

As the Gallowborne silently spread their ranks behind me, soldiers began dropping the swords. In the windows crossbows dipped as men retreated and the poor fools in front of me knelt. Farrier came to my side and I addressed him without looking.

"The two usurpers will be inside," I said. "Secure them."

"By your will, Countess," he murmured.

I got off my mount and offered the reins to one of my soldiers, dismissing John's strong suggestion that I take an escort with a sharp gesture. They would be more hindrance than help where I was headed. Ignoring the terrified soldiers as I strode into the palace, I headed straight for the heart of what had once been the seat of power for the Fairfax dynasty – and the Albans before them. The room where the Ruling Council had once held its sessions was deserted, and the door to it locked. Nothing the strength of the Named couldn't force open. It was evident by even a short look that the luxurious room hadn't been used in some time. The two Wastelanders must actually have been arrogant enough to have used the former throne room for their audiences. Idly taking off my helmet and shaking loose the hair under it, I set down the chunk of goblin steel on the table with a loud thunk. My gauntlets soon followed it, thrown carelessly as I headed for the chair at the head of the table. I paused there, my hand on the arm of it.

"I've felt you looking since the moment I left Arcadia," I spoke into the gloom. "Come out."

The woman slipped out of the deeper shadows in the corner, idly strolling to the seat on the other end and plopping herself down on it.

"Evening, Squire," the Thief said. "Fancy meeting you here."

## Chapter 20: Skew

*"An alliance of victors is like a hearth in summer."*

– Julianne Merovins, tenth First Princess of Procer

I'd met a handful of heroes since I'd first become the Squire, and Thief was one of the harder ones to place. She was, quite blatantly, an egotist. Yet she lacked some of the traits that were common with the more arrogant heroes: both the Lone Swordsman and the Exiled Prince – the Prince in particular – had been almost unnaturally handsome. The appearance of a Named usually changed to reflect how they thought of themselves, after all. Yet Thief was not particularly good-looking, I noted as I studied her. Maybe two inches taller than me, she was a skinny woman with short dark hair and blue-grey eyes. The leathers she always wore had been cut for her frame, but weren't particularly tight: much like me, she'd have little to show for it if they were. Most of all, she lacked the *weight* to her presence that I'd come to associate with powerful Named. William, for all his flaws, had been able to mesmerize a room full of rebels with but a few words. I had a hard time imagining Thief ever doing the same.

"You sure you should have taken off that helmet?" the heroine smiled. "You've seen how costly a mistake that can be."

I withdrew my hand from the arm of the chair, and slowly sat down. The seat wasn't made for someone wearing plate, evidently, and it groaned under the weight of my armour.

"We going to play the threat game?" I asked bluntly. "Thief, I could have killed you with a hand tied behind my back last time we met. I've since murdered a demigod for power. We both know how that fight goes."

The other woman's eyes turned cold.

"A fair fight, maybe," she said. "I'm not in the habit of having those."

I snorted.

"And *I* am?" I replied. "Look, I'm as willing as tangle as the next villain but if I get an occasion to put a shot someone's back in the dark, I'm sure as Hells taking it."

"How remarkable," she sneered.

"Well, I *have* been spending a lot of time with goblins lately," I said. "But I gotta say that putdown's a little rich, coming from someone whose entire Name is about theft."

Thief smirked.

"Oh?" she said. "Is someone displeased their treasury's gone?"

"I am," I smiled thinly. "I'm about to have to find food and lodgings for at least a hundred thousand refugees while also running a military campaign and I don't have the funds for any of it."

"The Tower will shell out the gold," Thief dismissed.

"The Tower's putting down internal troubles, and I'm about to spit in its eye," I said. "It's not going to be giving me a single copper for the foreseeable future."

"Villains stabbing each other in the back at the first sign of trouble," the heroine grinned unpleasantly. "History does tend to repeat itself, doesn't it?"

"I'm not-" I began, then stopped. "Oh *fuck you*."

She blinked in surprise.

"Who do you think you are, exactly?" I asked.

"A heroine, *villain*," she replied.

"Someone tried to mind rape a city of a hundred thousand last year, Thief, and it sure as Hells wasn't anyone on my side," I barked. "You think being William's minion for a few months gives you a pass to be an asshole forever and still have the moral high ground? Think again."

"I spoke against that," Thief hissed.

"Words are wind," I said. "You could have taken a stand. You didn't. So much for heroism, eh?"

"I might have made mistakes," she said through gritted teeth. "I'll own up to that. But you know what I'm not, at least? A godsdamned collaborator."

My face blanked. I'd been called a traitor before. By a crowd in Summerholm, when I was fresh into my name, and by the Lone Swordsman in the months that followed. But it was the first time anyone had actually called me a collaborator to my face. No doubt quite a few people had thought it in the past, but I'd never actually heard it spoken out loud. It stung more than I would

have liked, even now. Things with a grain of truth to them usually did.

"I took the path that damages Callow the least," I said.

"You took the path that involved selling your soul to the Hellgods," she replied flatly.

"I got a close look at the Hashmallim, in Liesse," I said. "I think you think your side's any gentler than mine, you've been listening to stories too much."

"My 'side' hasn't stolen an entire fucking kingdom," she snapped.

I shrugged.

"And what's it done to free it since?" I asked.

"It rebelled," Thief said. "And you murdered the people that did. I'm sure they felt very *saved*."

"You think putting a crown on Gaston Caen would have helped this country?" I said, leaning forward. "Gods, Thief, the man fled into exile before the first legion was in sight of Vale during the Conquest. He was a bloody coward and the First Prince owned him down to his toes."

"So you say," the heroine sneered.

"So the *facts* say," I coldly said. "You think she poured that much silver into a doomed rebellion so an old rival of the Principate could be restored? She wanted a western protectorate to push back Praes, that's all there was to it."

"Elizabeth of Marchford would have been queen," Thief said. "She would not have settled for that."

"You think she would have had a choice?" I pressed. "After Praes burned the land on the way out, who would have leant the coin and crops to keep Callow alive through the winter?"

"That would have been the Empire's fault," she hissed.

"Gods Below, am I tired of hearing about fault," I shouted. "Fault and blame and Good – none of it *fixes any of this*. If you want a solution, you deal with realities. With what exists, not the pretty little world that 'should be'. Praes would have acted in its interest, and that meant torching the country. Procer would have acted in its interests, which was making us a protectorate. Anyone who plans without acknowledging that isn't planning, they're lying to themselves. That's what I can't stand about the lot of you. Do you think doing the right thing is enough? Fuck you. I've had to bloody my hands to get this far, Thief. I didn't enjoy it, and some of the things I've done will



haunt me to my grave. But the only clean victories are the ones in stories. Preach all you want, *I have gotten things done.*"

I panted, out of breath, my tone quieted.

"Which of you pricks on the other side can say the same?" I asked.

"Sometimes you have to take a stand even if you know you can't win," she said.

"That's pride talking," I replied. "That's killing people for your principles, and I can't think of anything more selfish than that."

Thief laughed bitterly.

"You know, there's truth in what you say," she admitted. "But none of it would have mattered if you were a heroine."

I'd been at this game long enough that the surprise never made it to my face.

"William was never meant to lead," Thief said. "He was terrible at it. But I look at the party we had, and can't help but thing there was always supposed to be one. All of us were born in Callow, except for the Wandering Bard – and I'm not convinced she was supposed to be a part of it. One Named for every Calamity, if you'd been on the side of Good. And we've all seen what you can do with an uphill battle."

"I know them, the Calamities," I said. "I know what they can do better than most. It wasn't a fight that could be won."

"The Heavens have a way of evening odds," she said.

"Prayer is what people rely on when they've run out of plans," I replied. "I've no patience for it."

In this, at least, I was truly Black's successor.

"What you've built is collapsing," Thief said.

"By the end of the year, there will be no Praesi governor in Callow," I said.

"I'm not talking about the governors," she said. "I'm talking about the Ruling Council."

"It's done," I said tiredly. "I tried, it failed. Come sunup the two of them will be dead and I'm not surrendering that authority ever again."

The heroine frowned.

"You're naming yourself queen," she said.

"Vicequeen, most likely," I said. "A ceremonial title: I can't run the country if I'm waging war abroad, and it's become clear I'm not great at it anyway. I'll name a Governor-General to handle everything and keep power in name only. The Tower won't accept anyone but a villain at the head of Callow."

Thief stared at me for a long time.

"What do you want, Squire?" she said. "I thought you'd come here to threaten me or force a fight, but that's obviously not the case. Why are we here?"

"A tenth," I said.

The heroine blinked.

"What?"

"You get to keep a tenth of the treasury," I said. "The rest goes back in the vault."

"Are you trying to bribe me with coin already in my possession?" she asked.

"Bribe, no," I said. "I'm hiring the Guild of Thieves."

"We're not for hire," Thief said.

"Fine, I'm giving you a 'gift' for anticipated services, then," I grunted. "Do I need to wink, or are we on the same page?"

"That's not-" the heroine stopped before finishing her sentence. "What do you want to hire us *for*?"

"The Empress and Black have networks of informants forty years in the making, backed by the Legions of Terror," I said. "The First Prince has a hundred thousand battle-hardened veterans and the wealthiest nation on Calernian at her feet. If I want to play in the same league, I need talented people and I need them *now*. Your people are criminals, but they're criminals with presence in every Callowan city and a fountain of foreign contacts. Right now I only have eyes in the Legions and the Wasteland – I'm blind everywhere else and it's already cost me."

"I'm a heroine," Thief reminded me.

"If William had stuck to killing criminals in the streets of Summerholm, I would have given him a salary and a godsdamned badge," I replied frankly. "I work with the monsters because they give me the means to do what I need to, not because I have any illusions about what they are. I don't fight heroes out of

principle, Thief, I fight them because they keep trying to kill me and make a mess of Callow in the process."

"And if I don't cooperate?" she asked lightly, but her eyes betrayed how serious she was.

"This is the part where I say 'if you're not an asset, you're a liability', right?" I sighed. "I get back the treasury, is what I do, because I need it. And then as long as you stay out of my way, I will politely pretend you don't exist."

I smiled thinly.

"And I think you will," I continued. "Stay out of my way. It's not like you want any of my opponents to win instead: I'm the lesser evil. Besides, in case you hadn't noticed, there's wolves at the gates. I don't have the time or energy to spare on pointless pissing matches."

The Thief stared at me in silence. I met her eyes without flinching.

"Assassin tried to recruit me, when I first came into my Name," she suddenly said.

"I'm told he's a regular bundle of laughs," I replied.

"The conversation couldn't have lasted more than a quarter hour," Thief said. "To this day, I shiver when I think of it. That... *thing* was death made flesh."

I wasn't sure where she was headed with this, so I kept my peace.

"And yet," the heroine said, "I think you might just be the most dangerous villain I've ever met."

"You've never met Black," I said.

"It's not about power," Thief replied. "You make it easy to want to follow you. Because you make sense, because you get results. I should try to kill you tonight, because if I don't you might just damage Calernia beyond repair."

"Will you?" I asked.

Silence reigned.

"Baroness Kendal is still alive," Thief said. "She was wounded, but took refuge in the cathedral. The priests are hiding her."

I nodded slowly, then rose to my feet.

"I'll need the treasury back in the vault before I leave," I said.

"Minus our tenth," Thief smiled bitterly, looking up at the ceiling.

I made for the door, passing her by.

"Squire," she said. "No, Foundling now I suppose. If you ever become what you say you're fighting..."

"Then more dangerous people than you will be putting me down," I replied, and walked away.

I got the last word, I thought, largely because she had nothing to reply to that.

—

"Lady Squire," Orim the Grim greeted me.

He'd been sleeping until recently. I'd learned to tell the signs, with orcs – the voices got a little deeper, and they showed their teeth more often. The general was almost as tall as Hakram, who was unusually so for his kind, and his skin was of a yellow-green I'd only ever seen in goblins before. It was uncommon in the Lesser Steppes, I knew: almost all my legionaries from there were of a green so dark it looked like black. Of the man himself, I knew little. When it had become clear he'd remain one of the important people of Laure for the foreseeable future I'd asked my own orcs about him, but gotten only vague outlines. Juniper had told me he'd been chieftain of the Silent Men before Black recruited him halfway through the civil war, one of larger clans in the Lesser Steppes. Nauk had remembered he'd been known for his warring with the Deoraithe of the Wall, and all Hakram knew was that he'd once wiped out an entire smaller clan in a single night for having stolen some of his cattle. I wasn't surprised, considering the cognomen his legion had earned during the Conquest: *Exterminatus*.

The Fifth had been under Marshal Grem's command during his assault on the Wall, a campaign undertaken to make sure none of the Deoraithe would be with the army of Callow at the Fields of Streges. After taking one of the forts, Orim the Grim had put every soldier in it to the sword as keeping any prisoners would have slowed his march. That had happened a long way from Laure, though. In the capital his reputation was as a fair but distant commander who would not hesitate to resort to violence if pushed. His open enmity with the late Governor Mazus had won him some esteem, since the Fifth's legionaries had made it a point to put the governor's men in their place whenever they could. I'd been raised to the sight of big armoured orcs punching the teeth out of city guard who overstepped, and it had gone a long way in teaching me to see greenskins were not the enemy. A long time ago, that. My ascension to the Ruling Council has not granted me any better insight into the man, since he'd withdrawn from any

relation to it after ensuring the Fifth would not have to obey any orders from its members.

"General Orim," I replied.

The room in the barracks was almost bare, a sure sign the orc didn't use it regularly. In my experience greenskins like to decorate with trophies from victories anywhere they stayed longer than a few weeks. The Fifth's general staff was nowhere in sight: it seemed Orim had grasped that this wouldn't be that kind of meeting. Save for a table with a jug of some dark alcohol – almost empty by now – and two cups to accompany it, there was little of note here. I'd not been offered any of the drink, and had not asked: orcs drank liquor hard enough to leave holes in whatever it touched. Something about their stomachs taking to alcohol differently, Hakram had told me. As it happened said orc was seated at my side, across from the general. He polished off the rest of his cup and let out a pleased little sigh.

"Callowan drink just isn't the same," Adjutant said.

"They make passable wine in the north," the general replied amusedly. "But nothing close to *brannahal*."

My eyes narrowed. I did not recognize the word. It was from an older dialect of Kharsum, I thought, but aside from the part meaning fire I didn't recognize the rest. As for the mention of the north of Callow, I almost grimaced. 'Wine' to the north of Ankou was actually a heavily concentrated version of brandy made by farmers and cattle-herders out in the field. It was said that in a pinch it could be used instead of lamp oil.

"Deadhand tells me you're to handle order in the city," Orim suddenly said.

Coming from a Praesi, the way he'd been called by his nickname instead of his Name would have been an insult. From an orc, though, the meaning was different. The Clans didn't really have titles aside from chieftain. Even their rare mages did not get much distinction from the mass. Orcs who distinguished themselves in some way earned a nickname, and for someone not sharing a clan to use it was a mark of respect. Evidently Adjutant had made some inroads here while I'd been busy in the city.

"I have the usurpers in my custody," I said. "I'll be executing them publicly come morning and re-establishing a civilian government afterwards."

"We're under martial law," Orim gravelled.

"We don't have the soldiers to waste to enforce that," I replied calmly. "I need you with General Istrid as soon as possible."

"She knows the people here, general," Hakram said. "If she says the peace will hold, it'll hold."

The older orc conceded the point with a grunt.

"Where is the Fifteenth headed?" he asked.

"I've sent Juniper south," I said. "She'll be gathering additional men as she goes."

"She should be marching to Vale," the orc bluntly stated. "To put her soldiers under her mother's command."

"That won't be happening," I replied frankly. "The forces will remain divided for the campaign."

"Ruling Council's dead," Orim said. "And it didn't have authority of the Legions when it was still breathing."

"I am the Squire," I coldly said. "Her Dread Majesty is preoccupied with Wolof and Black is abroad. My orders are not to be gainsaid."

The general's face went stony.

"Knightsbane's fought two wars and a hundred skirmishes," he growled. "So have I. What do you have under your belt, three half-baked battles? The soldiers should go to Vale."

"I could make this about power," I replied idly. "We both know that using a sliver of power I could order you to drown yourself and you would. But I don't need to. I have information you don't. The chain of command is clear. *Do it.*"

The orc was twice my size. Scarred, bursting with muscle and capable of popping a man's neck off his shoulders with his bare hand – and yet he knew better than to try to loom. Orim glanced at Hakram and saw only ice there. Adjutant had picked his side long ago. The general scoffed, but did not push any further.

"You'll have orders for General Istrid," he said, tacitly offering to carry them.

"Juniper is already in contact with her by scrying," I said. "The Knightsbane will be marching on Holden as soon as your men arrive."

The older orc frowned.

"We're pretty sure the fae can portal from one stronghold to the other," he said.

"They can," I confirmed. "We'll be splitting their forces with multiple assault so you don't bear the brunt of it."

"And you think they'll just let General Juniper leisurely stroll south?" he sceptically asked. "They've raiding parties out."

"And the Diabolist has an army out in the field," I said. "So far the Summer Court has refrained from hitting Liesse. I've sent two Named down there to remedy to that. Akua Sahelian will have to be dealt with after the fae are repelled, and I don't want her forces fresh when it happens."

Apprentice had been less than pleased at being partnered with Archer, but sending either one on their own would have been a disaster.

"My detachment will be stabilizing Laure, then we'll move on," I continued. "To Denier. I mean to free Marshal Ranker's legions if I can."

Orim's dark eyes lingered on my skin, the visible reminder that I was at least half-Deoraithe by blood.

"Kegan's not to be trusted," he said. "She was never comfortable under the Tower – the Fairfaxes allowed her to run things the way she liked without even tribute."

"I know what she wants," I said. "That gives me leverage. And twenty thousand men is nothing to sneer at, if they can be pointed in the right direction."

"Rely on them and you'll get a knife in the back," he gravelled.

"The correct word is use, not rely," I said. "When can I expect you to move out?"

He mulled over it.

"Two days," he said. "Supplies are mostly ready, but I want them prepared for a hard march."

I nodded.

"We should be gone, by then," I said. "Until we are you can liaise with Adjutant if you need anything. I'll be busy pacifying the capital."

He saluted, reluctantly, and I pushed back my chair.

"Hakram?" I prompted.

"I'll be in touch, general," Adjutant said.

We left together. I still had over a bell before dawn, by my reckoning, but I'd need to sleep at some point. And when I woke up, I'd have to make sure the largest city in Callow didn't start rioting the moment my legionaries left. Joy.

## Chapter 21: Example

*"To conquer until all of Creation is desert or province: that is the ideal of Praes. Mock their failures if you must but do not ever forget their victories."*

– King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

*The sword tore through flesh and bone with a meaty sound, sending the guard's head rolling on the ground. A waste – Black would not have pursued him, had he fled. Shaking the blood off his blade with a flick of the wrist, the green-eyed Knight stepped deeper into the Pirate Queen's sanctum, feet burdened with grim purpose.*

*"Amateurs," Ranger said from his side. "They didn't even have a proper watch."*

*"They thought they were safe," Black replied.*

*"They won't after tonight," Warlock added. "If any of them survive, anyway."*

*The chatter was unnecessary, but he'd long become used to Warlock's cheerfully morbid comments enough that it barely registered. Still, he traded a half-amused, half-exasperated glance with Ranger. They met another corsair on their way to the throne room but this one did not even get to open her mouth before Wekesa turned her upper body into ash: dealing with the pirates was child's play after a year of back alley dogfights with his rivals and the Order of the White Hand, not to mention the civil war that followed. Not a reason to get sloppy, but overestimating an enemy was just as dangerous as overestimating them. By the time they reached the doors to the Pirate Queen's own throne room the sounds of the mess outside had started to drift up to their ears. Curses and screams of terrors tore through the night's quiet, the same reaction Captain always elicited when she dared to cut loose. Black pushed open the driftwood doors in front of him without breaking stride, ready to finally put an end to the night's slaughter.*

*"They sent the Black Knight and his death squad for little 'ole me? Guess I should be flattered," the Queen laughed as she rose from her throne and unsheathed her cutlass. "So which of you feels like dancing with death, children?"*

*Ranger sighed and shot the Queen in the leg, arrow knocked and flying faster than you could take a breath.*

*"Is it me or does that never get old?" Warlock mused. "They always get the funniest look on their faces when we won't play along."*



The Pirate Queen dropped to the floor with a hoarse cry of pain, clutching her leg. Black wasted no time closing the distance and kicked her cutlass out of her hands.

"You are correct," he said. "I am the Black Knight."

"Do you have no honour –"she started.

"No," Black replied, crouching to be of a height with her.

"Drop the knife, Pirate," Ranger called out. "Otherwise the next one goes through the eye."

There was the clatter of metal on the ground and the Queen let go of the blade she'd pulled from under her tunic, grimacing.

"Fine, you lot are big and bad," she snarled. "You made your point. Why am I still alive?"

"Because you set half of Thalassina on fire a few months back," Black said.

"You going to parade me around Ater 'cause I've been a bad girl?" the pirate asked with an ugly smile. "And to think I'd heard you were dropping the old way bullshit."

"You misunderstand me," the Black Knight replied. "It takes talent, to execute an operation of that breadth."

"You should work on your recruitment pitch, love," Queen sneered. "I'm feeling a mite uncooperative at the moment."

Black's eyes hardened.

"Your prize ship has been sunk. Most your lieutenants are dead. You are kneeling on the floor of your very seat of power," he murmured. "Bringing you to this took me four people and a rowboat, Pirate. You asked me what my point was? This is it. Do not make me repeat myself."

"Fuck it, and fuck you," the Pirate Queen smiled. "I'm not flying an Imperial flag, and I'm sure as Hells not gonna take orders from the Tower. Do your worst, boy – I've laughed in the face of harder men than you."

Warlock's eyes became wreathed in fire and the dark-skinned man stepped forward, but Black help up a hand to stop him.

"You call yourself the Pirate Queen, but I've noticed your crews sometimes refer to themselves as corsairs," the Black Knight said.

"You trying to bore me to death, Knight? I'll give you points for originality,"

*"Unlike pirates, corsairs are known to sometimes operate under official sanction," Black said. "Not as part of a nation's navy, but as... auxiliaries of a sort."*

*The Pirate Queen eyed him dubitatively.*

*"If we're not raiding Praes then who?"*

*"By the end of the week word will spread to the Free Cities that the pirate threat has been dealt with," Black smiled coldly. "I expect merchant shipping to Thalassina to resume soon after."*

*"Well look at the balls on you," the Queen whistled. "Won't they just bail again when I start boarding their boats?"*

*"Not if you confine yourself to a handful of them per month," Black said. "A risky business, certainly, but there will be enough who think the payoff worth it. The Dread Empire would, of course, collect a cut in exchange for the right to operate in its waters."*

*"So you want my ships on a leash, is that it?" the pirate sneered. "What if I say no?"*

*The green-eyed man laid the flat of his blade on his knees.*

*"That is your prerogative."*

*There was a long moment of silence as the Queen mulled over the offer. Sighing, she finally spat in the palm of her hand and offered it to the man in front of her. Black spat into his own without batting an eye, ignoring her puerile attempt to crush his fingers when they shook on it. He rose.*

*"A woman named Scribe will come tomorrow to work out the details of the arrangement. A pleasant evening to you, then," the Knight said as he sheathed his sword. He made for the door, but before he could pass the threshold the Queen called out to him.*

*"Knight," she asked. "If I'd said no, what would you have done?"*

*"Used your head a prop when making the same offer to your second-in-command," Black replied, not even bothering to turn as he strode out of the Pirate Queen's throne room.*

*There was no slow transition between sleep and wakefulness. I was one, then I the other. I rolled out of my sheets still tired and padded across the room to the window. Dawn had come a gone hours ago, by the looks of the sun. Grabbing a blanket from a seat, I wrapped myself in it but found it did nothing to hinder the cold. It wasn't coming from outside, I supposed. Breathing out quietly, I stared at the gardens sprawling below and considered the Name dream I'd just woken up from. It'd been a while, since I'd last had one of those. I'd known for years that Black had handled the*

pirates based in the Tidelesse Isles after the Empress ascended to the throne, but that there'd been a Named involved was not common knowledge. Considering that the pirates had first come from a Praesi fleet smashed by the Thalassocracy one at port, that they'd eventually be forced back into Imperial service was darkly amusing. The history lesson wasn't why I'd gotten the dream, of course. I had decisions ahead of me.

Robber, by now, would have prisoners from the Dark Guilds. If there were any from the Thieves I'd have to release them, but that still left the Smugglers and the Assassins. Months ago, I'd thought to dismantle the Guild of Assassins. Even before Ratface had laid out the logistical difficulties of that, I'd had a little chat with the Empress on the subject. Pointless, she'd called the entire enterprise. I still disagreed with her. There was a difference between a handful of men and woman who killed for coin spread all over Callow and an organized guild of them. The part she might have been correct about was that the amount of time and resources I'd have to sink into this far outweighed the gains to be made – namely, the absence of a godsdamned gang of killers for hire in my homeland. The situation had changed since she and I had talked: back then, all I'd had to worry about was Heiress plotting in the south. Now I had other cats to skin than a guild that probably killed fewer people in my territory every year than roadside accidents.

My Name was urging me to make vassals of them. Pretty bluntly, too. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. It wasn't a decision I was willing to make before looking one of them in the eyes. I turned away from the window. Breakfast, first, and then a show. Hakram should have organized everything by now.

—

"It's not a Praesi invention, you know," Adjutant said.

"Huh," I said. "That's surprising. They're the ones famous for it."

The sun had melted any traces of frost our passage had made in Fairfax Place. Not that anyone would be able to see them anyway: the plaza was packed to the brim with the people of Laure. Hakram had to place criers at street corners to arrange as much, since just nailing parchments announcing the mandatory presence would have been largely pointless. The overwhelming majority of people in the capital couldn't read, and it was still one of the most educated places in Callow – some of the Fairfaxes had encouraged scholarship, though never to the extent of funding academies like they did in some of the Proceran principalities. I imagined that kind of expense would have been hard to justify when the Legions could be marching on Summerholm at any time. It was impossible for a crowd this size – there must have been twenty thousand people in the plaza alone – to be silent, but it was *quiet*. The

appearance of my legionaries had been so sudden no one knew quite what to make of it.

"Miezans brought it with them over the sea," Hakram told me. "It was the punishment for rowdy slaves."

The tall orc was standing besides me, so I could see the displeasure on his face as he spoke. Considering orcs had made for very popular slaves in the Miezan Empire, I could take a guess as to why.

"So when Triumphant was using it, it had... implications," I murmured.

Adjutant refrained from adding 'may she never return' though his hand twitched when he suppressed the reflex of bringing his knuckles to his forehead.

"I'm telling you this because the High Lords will think it's part of the message you're sending," the orc said.

I nodded. The both of us watched Nauk's men drag the usurpers to the tall wooden crosses we'd had placed in the middle of the plaza. Satang looked numb, but Murad was struggling against the pair of Callowan legionaries forcing him to move. One of them lost patience and cracked a gauntleted hand across his mouth, drawing blood. The two Praesi were hoisted up the cross, and then an orc brought out the iron spikes and the hammer. Satang's hoarse scream filled the plaza as the legionary nailed her first wrist down.

"You are rowdy slaves to me," I muttered. "Well, that ought to get their attention."

"They'll be pushing to censure you through the Imperial court," Hakram said.

"The Court I have to worry about isn't in Ater," I replied.

Another gut-wrenching scream echoed as the work on Murad began.

"Breaking entirely with the Tower would have consequences," Adjutant said. "Ones we are ill-equipped to handle."

"I'll be calling myself a vicequeen, no a queen," I said. "There's an implication there I still answer to Her Dread Majesty."

"You're claiming a territory as large as Praes as under your direct command," Hakram pointed out. "You'd be more an ally than a vassal."

"She'll get tribute and soldiers," I said. "She struck the same deal with Daoine."

"You're not this thick," the orc gravelled. "Don't pretend."

Callow wasn't Daoine, of course. Its fields fed the Wasteland and its population was near the size of Praes'. There was a difference in the balance of power – Malicia could not allow me to just declare the de facto independence for a territory this large. It would be a major loss of face, influence and wealth for her. She would likely have to deal with internal rebellions if she was somehow convinced of the notion.

"I'm done letting High Lords having a say here, Hakram," I said.

"Please," Murad screamed, but the legionaries forced his legs together and drove a spike through the flesh and bone.

"Then find concessions to make," Adjutant replied. "We'll have around twice our number in legionaries on the field by the end of this. Fighting them would not end well, and the Empress *will* give the order if you leave her no other choice."

I conceded the point with a sullen grunt. Kilian hadn't been wrong on one thing: I had tired of compromise. The last spike tore through Satang Motherless' ankles and the legionaries wiped the blood off their armour with calm professionalism before moving away. The two Wastelanders hung from their crosses limply. Time for my part, then.

"The Ruling Council is officially dissolved," I spoke, weaving a thread of power into my voice so it would carry for blocks. "As of this moment, I take command of Callow until martial law is lifted. A Governor-General will be appointed shortly to oversee Laure."

I paused to let that sink in.

"You may disperse," I finished.

I allowed my eyes to scan the crowd. This was, in essence, the pivot of my presence in the capital. If a riot ensued everything was gonna go to shit – I'd need to leave behind a garrison and it was all down here from there. The scene with the two usurpers had been as much to sate them with blood as to offer a reminder: rebels died ugly deaths. Silence, the kind you only got in a church, reigned supreme. Then the first man knelt. From there it was like an avalanche. Within heartbeats, there was not a man woman or child standing in Fairfax Place. I breathed out slowly, then composed myself.

"Take me where Robber keeps them," I ordered Hakram, and we left without a word.

Going back Dockside was oddly nostalgic. I'd earned coin for blood here, back in the day. Would that the trades I made were still so innocent. The warehouse belonged to the fishermen's guild, though they were more a loose association than one of the true powers claiming that same name. It smelled of salt and dry fish, the reason why becoming obvious when the two of us entered: rows of bluegills and widemouth basses were hanging from the ceiling. I vaguely knew the salting was done different in other parts of Callow, but Laure was known for its particular take on the process. Southpooleans insisted their way of doing it was better, but they were just as wrong about that as they were about everything else. That was the lightest thought I allowed myself before painting blankness over my face. Weakness had no place here. There'd been legionaries standing guard around the warehouse and what looked like at least half Robber's cohort was spread inside.

Crossbows out, they kept an eye on the two dozen Callowans who'd been dragged out of their beds last night and brought here without an explanation any more elaborate than a kick in the back if they weren't moving fast enough. None of them were tied, I saw, save for a single pair. A man and woman who looked – and smelled liked tanners – but had an entire tenth of goblins keeping an eye on them at all times. Robber strutted up to me, a bit of blood on his lower lip, and massacred yet another salute.

"I've got a treat for you, Boss," the Special Tribune announced.

"It better not be a corpse," I said.

It was always a godsdamned corpse with him. He was like the world's most murderous cat, only it was worse because he was supposed to have a conscience. Or whatever the goblin equivalent of that was. *Probably more knives.*

"I would never," the yellow-eyed wretch said, deeply offended. "I'm a tender, gentle soul. I'm just misunderstood."

"I saw you eat a man's finger once," I said.

"Well, he was dead," Robber shrugged. "Wasn't like *he* was going to be using it."

He made sure to pitch his voice high enough to our guests would be able to hear him. I used to wonder whether he did things like for entertainment or for interrogation tactics before I'd realized there was no real difference between the two for him.

"So what have you got for me," I asked.

Engaging him would only keep sending this conversation spiralling further into madness and mind games.

"Smugglers' Guild," he said. "All except my present. Those two 'tanners' with enough steel and poison on them to kill a small village."

I raised an eyebrow.

"How'd you find them?" I asked.

"Ratface had them marked as potential members in his briefings," the goblin said. "We only had to kick the door and run in screaming to check if they actually were."

I resisted the urge to rub the bridge of my nose. *Results, Catherine*, I reminded myself. *He still got results.*

"Anybody high ranked?" I said.

"Top two Smugglers in the city," he said cheerfully. "Was going to torture that out of them, but they kept telling me. They seemed to think it would make us release them."

"Black tolerated their activities," I said. "They're not used to Legion attention."

To my teacher it had been more valuable to keep an eye on what was being brought into Callow illegally than to curtail their activities. Knowing him, he'd probably considered their dodging fees and tariffs like a payment of sorts.

"The were sloppy," Robber grinned viciously. "If that's the best criminals your people have to offer, it's no wonder you turned to Praes to get things done."

"We've a hole in the budget," I warned him. "Don't think I won't sell your hide in Mercantis for a few coppers."

"Please," he cackled. "I'm the official footrest of the queen of Callow. I'm worth at least a couple silvers."

I managed not to grimace at that, but it was a close thing. Not the footrest thing, that was an old joke between us, but this 'queen' business. That was a warning from him, that the rank and file of the Fifteenth expected for me to have a crown by the time we'd cleaned up the mess. Balancing the next few months was going to be like walking a tightrope. I allowed him to waddle away like he'd won. Little 'victories' like that usually kept him happy for a day or two, and when he was in a good mood he got into much less trouble.

"The assassins are watching you," Hakram said quietly.

I knew better than to look.

"Let's talk to our guests, then," I grunted.

I gestured for the goblin cohort to get the prisoners moving, seating them on a row of wooden crates. A few of them recognized me, apparently, because the moment I got closer they spoke up.

"Lady Foundling," a man in his fifties called out. "I must really protest. This is entirely unnecessary! We could have met at our offices-"

I glanced at the lieutenant standing behind him. She grinned, then smashed the copper bottom of her crossbow into the back of his head.

"Let's make one thing perfectly clear," I said. "This is not a courtesy visit. If you want to walk out of this room alive, I would discard the notion that you are in any way *protected* by the deal you made with Black."

I turned cold eyes on the crowd, saw a few shiver.

"I am not him," I said. "I have different expectations of you."

Sharp laughter came from further down the line. It was a woman, in her twenties with a missing eye. Looked like she'd been in a few scraps.

"Posturing," she said. "You don't have the balls to go against the Carrion Lord. We all know who you answer to."

I studied her for a moment.

**"Choke on your tongue,"** I Spoke.

Her eye went wide. She tried to breathe but couldn't and desperately clawing at her throat. You could have heard a pin drop in the warehouse, by the time she fell blue-faced to the ground.

"I trust," I said, "that there will be no more of that."

Several of the Smugglers had pissed themselves. I wrinkled my nose in distaste. Robber was right, they'd gotten *soft* under Imperial protection.

"Callow is at war," I said. "You have been called upon to serve."

The man from earlier – he must have been the local head – nodded in abject submission. His hands were shaking.

"Anything you need, Lady Foundling," he babbled.

"You'll be sending representatives to the Fifteenth," I said. "They are to put themselves at Supply Tribune Ratface's disposal and obey his every order. And while you do that, gather rations for an army on the march. You'll be keeping my army supplied



through the Wasaliti on its way south. I've no patience for parasites while the country is under siege."

That should allow Juniper to manoeuvre the way she needed to. Marchford just didn't have the supplies for an extended campaign, and with both the war in Wolof and General Istrid gathering legions near Vale there would be no time to requisition what we needed. I turned to the two assassins, who'd been watching all of this in silence. They were not scared, I saw. They weren't from a breed as easily unnerved as the smugglers.

"Neither of us has the authority to grant any demands you could make," the man among them said.

"Not even the head of our Guild in Laure would," the woman added, then shrugged. "Kill us, if you must. It makes no difference."

"You can carry a message," I said. "That will do."

"And you think the Guildmaster will listen?" the man said, cocking his head to the side.

"We have watched your men try to find us," the woman told me. "Prune branches if you can. The tree will survive."

I'd asked Ratface, a few months ago, to find me the Assassins. So I'd be able to wipe them out in one go. The anger that had driven me back then – the righteous indignation at the concept of a band of killers being allowed to run amok Callow without consequence – was not as sharp as it used to be. I had no spite left to spare for mortals, not when I was set against forces who thought of ripping out my heart as a mere warning.

"I won't kill you," I replied softly. "Oh no. I'll drag you back to Marchford, and then I'll let Apprentice rip out the information I need from your minds."

The woman's body stiffened ever so slightly.

"You'll most likely survive that," I casually continued. "Though not unscathed. What's left of you, I will trade to the Winter Court for a favour. They do enjoy their little games, the fae."

I felt the room cool around me.

"I doubt *you* will, though," I said. "Winter tends to play rough."

"Striking at us would take men you need elsewhere," the woman said.

The male assassin's eyes flicked towards her, then he sighed.

"A message can be carried," he conceded.

"Tell your Guildmaster that he's on notice," I said coldly. "His actions over the next few months are what will determine whether I go through your ranks with fire and sword and all the things that are worse I've refrained from using."

The woman nodded slowly.

"And the terms?" she asked.

"You take a contract in Callow, it goes by my desk," I said. "There's so much as a shoemaker that dies without my approval and I rip you out root and stem. You don't need to worry about running out of work, though."

I smiled thinly.

"I have a list," I said. "It will grow longer, before all is said and done."

The man considered this for a moment.

"And should the Guildmaster acceded to your request, will you handle the matters directly?"

"I'll be the one handling you," Adjutant said from my side. "Won't be hard to find. There's not a lot of orcs with one of those."

He brought up his bone hand, displaying the fingers. It made the assassins visibly uncomfortable, hardened as they were. They were, after all, still Callowan. Necromancy was the Enemy's tool, and one of its most unpleasant ones.

"You're dismissed," I said, gesturing for the goblins to untie the assassins.

It wasn't enough to worry about this war. I had to worry about the one after that, and when the High Lords knocked at one gate and Procer snuck through the other? There would be a need for ill-gained goods and dead men. All it cost me to get them was a principle.

I was fast running out of those.

## **Chapter 22: Govern**

*"We do not forget."*

– Official motto of the House of Iarsmai

I hadn't set foot in a House of Light since becoming the Squire, though to be fair my attendance at the daily sermons had always been shaky. This wasn't just any house, though: it was the Alban Cathedral, the beating heart of the faith in Callow. There were

hundreds of brothers and sister here at all times, and Praesi occupation had done nothing to change it. The priests, after all, had not taken part directly in the fighting for the capital during the Conquest. They'd healed any who went through their doors, but none had taken the field. The House of Light did not concern themselves with who ruled the land, only the souls of the people who lived on it. Or so they liked to say. Some priests were more politically-inclined than others: a few of the sermons had been very harsh on the subject of Evil and its servants, though they'd always refrained from outright preaching rebellion. That was the line Black had drawn when conceding freedom of worship in the conquered kingdom.

The main hall was filled with beds when I entered, though thankfully most of them were empty: with the end of the riots, the influx of wounded had ceased as well. I left the Gallowborne outside, and for once Tribune Farrier did not protest: the idea of being at risk here was as absurd for him as it was to me. White-robed priests stirred when I strode in, with an older woman coming forward. She did not have any marks distinguishing her from the others – the brothers and sisters had no ranks, and seniority did not always mean authority – but the simple fact that she was the one headed for me said it all. She had Deoraithe blood, I noted. Too pale to have both parents from the Duchy though. The sister bowed.

"Sermons have been suspended for a sennight, my lady," she said.

"The it's a good thing I'm not here for one," I replied. "Take me to the baroness."

She smiled with feinted confusion and began to answer, but I cut her off with a sharp gesture.

"I'm Catherine Foundling," I said.

"I am aware, Lady Squire," she said.

"Then you should know deceiving an Imperial dignitary while the city is under martial law qualifies as treason," I said. "Don't make that mistake. It would get ugly for both us, and I'm not here to hurt her."

"The cathedral offers refuge to all," she insisted.

"Look outside, sister," I said tiredly. "There are no refuges left. Don't make me ask twice."

She looked like she'd bitten into a lemon, but didn't protest again. There were catacombs under the cathedral, every child knew, but people not sworn to the House of Light were not allowed to set foot in them. Most of the Fairfax dynasty was buried there, save for the few whose heads were in the Hall of Screams.

I hadn't known for sure there were rooms other than the graveyard carved out in the foundations, but it was easy enough to suspect. They had to keep the food somewhere, not to mention the more contagious patients. Baroness Kendal was in one of the rooms that served the latter purposed, if I had to guess. I could feel power coming from the walls that made me uncomfortable, had the Beast raising its hackles underneath my skin. The whole cathedral was full of it, but it was particularly pure down here. I wasn't surprised, considering I could be more than twenty feet away from consecrated grounds. The sister knocked at the door and the baroness herself opened it, her arm in a sling.

"Lady Catherine," she said, blinking in surprise.

I looked at the priestess.

"You may go," I said, and it wasn't a suggestion.

She didn't enjoy that, but I didn't particularly care. I turned to Anne Kendal, taking in the sight of her. She was still pale, and not in the pretty way she usually was – it was the pale of someone who'd bled too much, not the ivory of good breeding.

"May I come in?" I asked.

"By all means," she replied, moving out of the way.

The room wasn't much to look at. A cot and a small table covered with fresh linens. A water basin in the corner, and an open book on the bed: something religious, by the looks of it. The baroness closed the door behind me.

"I'd invite you to sit down," the baroness said, "but I seem to be short on furniture."

"I don't intend to stay long," I half-smiled. "You should sit, though. You still look like you're recovering."

"The assassins punctured by lung and cut into my spine," she admitted. "Even the touch of the Heavens has been slow in working."

*Gods.* I hadn't thought her wounds had been that bad. No wonder people thought she was dead. And I'd probably let the people who'd done it go not a bell ago. The taste of self-disgust was thick on my tongue.

"I was aware of the risks when I accepted your offer," Kendal reassured me, misinterpreting the look on my face. "Praesi play for keeps."

"Don't they just," I muttered.

So did I, these days. I had a fresh batch of corpses in the city to prove it.

"I'd heard the Fifteenth had arrived, but I hardly believed it," the baroness, smoothing a silver curl back as she sat on the bed. "They'd have had to leave months ago."

"We went through Arcadia," I said.

She stared at me like I'd just grown another head.

"That's... possible?" she said.

"If you're a Duchess of Winter," I replied.

She looked genuinely unsure what to say at that. I forgot, now and then, that the kind of eldritch places I went and the many different creatures that tried to kill me in them were just legends to most people. Stories they never expected to see take flesh. I'd lost those kind of certainties: if it could be real it was and it was probably after my head for some godforsaken reason.

"Will you be using that as your title?" she finally asked, which she probably felt was relatively safe grounds.

"I'm leaving that up in the air until I've had a chat with Her Dread Majesty," I said. "I don't suppose the priests carried word of what happened today?"

She shook her head.

"They say isolation from the worries of Creation will allow me to heal quicker," she said.

"Ruling Council's dissolved," I said. "I stormed the palace last night and had Murad and Satang publicly crucified just before Noon Bell."

"Gods save us all," she whispered, closing her eyes. "It is ill-bred of me to say as much, but they deserved to die. Not this painfully, but they did."

"My legionaries will put them out of the misery after sundown," I shrugged. "Point will have been made by then."

That was as much pity as I was willing to expend for those two. I only had so much to spare, and there were many souls more deserving of it.

"If I may ask, who rules Callow then?" Kendal asked, eyes fluttering open.

"I do," I said. "But I'm going off to war for Gods know how long. Congratulations, Baroness Kendal: you've just been appointed Governess-General of Callow."

She eyed me carefully.

"There is no such thing," she said. "And if there was, the Empress would frown upon it."

"The Empress will have to cope," I said. "And I'll have to give her something for it, I'm sure. No doubt she'll have her price ready when we speak."

"I suppose I should thank you for the privilege," she finally said.

"Don't thank me," I said. "I want you to turn this country into something functional while I go off to kill the people burning it down. I'll leave you my seal – that gives you authority over everyone in Callow who's not in the Legions."

"The city must be in shambles," the baroness sighed.

"Heal quickly, Anne Kendal," I said. "Your home needs you, and so do I."

—

In the end, it took two more days before Laure was settled. The appointment of the Governess-General was met with enthusiasm by the city – she was well-known there and better liked – and quiet distaste by the legionaries of the Fifth. None of them had forgotten that she'd once been the Baroness Dormer and one of the foremost nobles of the Liesse Rebellion. That she had been made the highest-ranking person in Callow after myself was a bitter pill to swallow. They'd just have to deal with it: I didn't have anyone else remotely as competent and trustworthy at my disposal. That made for one fire mostly put out, so on to the next: the Deoraithe. I'd used the Fifth's mages to scry Marshal Ranker and inform her I would be headed for Denier immediately, though I couldn't give her a clear date of arrival. It was a good thing I didn't even try an estimate, because this time travelling was... difficult.

What I took my soldiers through did not look like Winter. Or Summer, for that matter. Unless I was mistaken we'd marched through the borderlands between both. It had been deserted on Winter's side, but on the last few days of the journey we'd begun to see larger and larger patrols from Summer gathering in the distance. It took us a week, in the end. Still shorter than it would have taken us through Creation, but inexplicably longer than it took us to get to Laure from Machford. There did not seem to be any rhyme or reason to the time spent in Arcadia, and my

control on it was erratic. I'd barely needed to do anything the first way through, but on this one not getting stuck for months had been a constant struggle. I did not believe our third way through would go uncontested.

The gate opened a full day south of Denier, since I'd never been in the city itself. I allowed my legionaries a bell to recover on these less-treacherous grounds before beginning the march anew. My two and half thousand men came in sight of the city's walls on the evening of the following day, though the Marshal's scouts found us long before that. I didn't bother to meet them in person – Nauk served as a go-between while I spoke with Hakram. When it came to Legion gossip, Adjutant was without equals.

"So," I said as Zombie trotted at his side. "Fourth Legion."

The tall orc shot me an amused look.

"Cognomen *Blackhands*," he said.

"I already knew that part," I complained. "Everybody knows that."

"They don't usually know where it's from," Hakram gravelled. "Ranker was the Matron of the Hungry Dog tribe, before she took up with Lord Black. She took all goblins of age with her into war and sent the children to half a dozen other tribes."

I whistled, reluctantly impressed.

"That's a hell of a bet to make," I said. "He was still an up and comer back then, and the Empress a relative unknown. Still doesn't tell me where that cognomen is from."

"Hungry Dog tribe had a ritual, when time came to choose their matron," Adjutant said. "All the candidates put their hand in a brazier – the one who kept it the longest got to rule."

"High pain tolerance doesn't mean good leadership," I grunted.

"It's about who was willing to suffer the most to get it," the orc said. "I can respect that. Ranker kept her hand in there for half a day, long after everybody else had abandoned. Her left hand's a blackened ruin, and she's refused any healing ever since."

"And they named an entire legion after that?" I frowned.

"Officers in the Fourth kept the tradition," Hakram said. "Even those not goblins. Most of them take healing afterwards, but everybody has to be willing to burn for power."

"That feels like it should be against regulations," I said, then glanced at him. "... is it?"

The thing with being Named was that rules only applied to you if you allowed them to. For example, my relationship with Kilian was technically breaking a rule about fraternization – she was under me in the chain of command. I'd learned the most important of the regs, but some of the smaller ones I'd, uh, only skimmed. In my defence, there were a lot.

"It's skirting the line about voluntary injuries," the orc replied. "That can qualify as desertion, if you're not careful. But the Marshal's been with the Carrion Lord since the beginning. Those that were get to run their legion however they want."

A woman used to getting her own way, then, and one of the three highest-ranked military officers in the Empire to boot. I narrowed my eyes, thinking back to an old Name dream of mine – she'd been with Grem One-Eye and Istrid during the civil war. That'd been what, thirty years ago? And she'd already been a matron candidate before that. I wasn't clear how old you had to be for that, but at least ten years old felt like a safe bet. Considering it was rare for a goblin to make it past thirty-five, that Ranker was at least forty was notable.

"How old is she?" I asked.

"Near sixty," Hakram said. "And no, nobody knows how she made it that old. Most common guess is that Lord Black had rituals done to extend her lifespan."

"He doesn't like using blood magic," I frowned, as there was no real question about what kind of a ritual could be used for such a purpose. "He would have needed a very good reason."

"She's the most powerful goblin in the Empire, bar none," Adjutant said. "And she's a vocal advocate for the Tribes being involved with the Legions. Pickler says a lot of the Matrons were in favour of going isolationist after the civil war."

I raised an eyebrow.

"They made a lot of gains when Malicia won the throne," I pointed out. "Breeding restrictions were lifted and they pretty much run the Imperial Forges."

That part hadn't been taught in the histories back at the orphanage, but it had been in the pile of books Black had dropped into my lap when I first became the Squire. I'd taken me a few years to understand that those were meant in part to be a primer to Imperial politics – by learning how all the major players had gotten where they were, I could get a read on what they wanted. Before the civil war the High Lords of Foramen had owned all the forges in the city, though they'd used goblins as labour. Malicia had given ownership to the Tribes and only allowed High Lady Banu to take a cut from the proceeds. A significant one, but it'd been



a sizeable blow to her power base. I'd not been surprised to learn that she was part of the Truebloods.

"They've always had a bend that way," Hakram shrugged. "And no one gets involved with the Tower for long without getting burned. I can understand wanting to take their win and go home."

I hummed.

"So she's a key player, then," I said. "If she goes, the Matrons she'd keep in check get bolder."

"She's not someone you can bully, Cat," he warned. "She's run Denier for twenty years and the Fourth is rabidly loyal. Get on her bad side and even *our* goblins will get restless. She's to the Tribes what One-Eye is to the Clans."

The looming figure of an era, he meant. Even Juniper got star struck when she spoke about Marshal Grem, and she was not a girl who impressed easy. I allowed the conversation to ebb as I considered what was ahead of us. Duchess Kegan who'd raised her army of twenty thousand was only half the problem I had to deal with. I knew what the Deoraithe wanted, and our shared enemy was common ground enough I was more or less confident I could point her in the right direction. The question was whether I could make Marshal Ranker buy into the notion. Marshals weren't just the Imperial officers with the authority to command several legions: they had a broader responsibility put on them.

One-Eye was charged with securing the border with the Principate, Marshal Nim with keeping peace in the Wasteland. Ranker was meant to keep the Duchy of Daoine in check, positioned near the best crossing of the Silver Lake's tributary to slow the Deoraithe down if they rebelled. I had, theoretically, the authority to give her orders. But her responsibility to keep an eye on Daoine came straight from the Tower, and that meant gave Ranker a lot of leeway. Malicia's orders came before anyone else's, no matter the circumstances. I remained silent all the way to the city, but no solution presented itself.

—

Denier was a sleepy little city, about the size of Summerholm but nowhere as heavily fortified. It had rarely ever seen fighting: whenever the Empire had bypassed Summerholm and crossed the Hwaerte, they tended to go straight from Laure. The city had been stormed during the Conquest, but it had surrendered after a token resistance — it was in no way capable of resisting the likes of what Praesi sappers could unleash. Its only real military importance came from the fact that it stood near the easiest crossing into Daoine. Higher up the river the harsh currents made navigation tricky and the making of a pontoon bridge nigh impossible. The waters west of the city were almost lazy in

comparison and full of large mud banks. There was no bridge into the Duchy, of course. That no such thing would be built without the sanction of the Dukes and Duchess of Daoine had been one of the conditions written into the treaty that saw Daoine folded into Callow after the First Crusade. No Fairfax had ever dared to go back on that word, even when the northerners flouted the authority of the throne.

The greatest general in Callowan history, Elizabeth Alban, had famously attempted to invade the then-Kingdom of Daoine. By the the Queen of Blades had already proven her ability by occupying three principalities of what was not yet the Principate, crushing a Liessen rebellion and turning back a Praesi invasion. The expectation had been that, within a few months, the Deoraithe would be made subjects of Callow. Instead she'd had to slog through the countryside for two long years, losing thousands to ambushes and night attacks while her supply trains disappeared. Historians usually noted that given another year she might have won anyway by forcing a decisive battle at the capital of Daoine, but the invasion had collapsed when the Praesi had crossed the border again under Dread Empress Regalia. After the Wastelanders were defeated and the Empress killed as her flying fortress crashed into Laure, the Queen of Blades had begun planning a second invasion.

So the Watch had murdered her in her bed, in her own seat of power.

No ruler of Callow had ever forgotten that pointed warning. Had half the population of Daoine not been wiped out by Dread Empress Triumphant when she took the continent, the Duchy might very well be a sovereign nation to this day. A combination of worries about Praesi resurgence even after Triumphant died and Eleanor Fairfax's deft diplomacy – helped along by her famous 'friendship' with the Queen of Daoine – had seen the kingdom made a duchy, though one so removed from the authority of the throne it was effectively a vassal state instead of truly a part of Callow. That state of affairs had been maintained after the Conquest, with regular tributes and fixed war time obligations being signed over to the Tower by treaty. My short-lived Ruling Council had changed nothing in that regard: Duchess Kegan's envoy had flatly refused any notion that they were subject to its authority and I'd recognized that as a fight I couldn't win. And wasn't even sure I wanted to, to be honest. Daoine had always gotten on just fine on its own. *Don't fix it if it ain't broke.*

The gates were open for us when my soldiers finally made it to Denier, ranks of legionaries atop the walls watching us. I rode in at a brisk pace, and only reined in my horse when a Taghreb with the markings of Staff Tribune headed in my direction with two lines for escort. I quietly ordered the Gallowborne to allow

them passage, though Farrier saw to it they immediately surrounded the legionaries of the Fourth when they got lose.

"Lady Squire," the olive-skinned man greeted me, sharply saluting.

"Staff Tribune," I replied. "You look like a man carrying a message."

"Marshal Ranker asks that you attend to her immediately, ma'am," he said.

I cocked my head to the side.

"My men are not yet settled," I said.

"I would handle this myself, my lady," he said. "The Marshal would like you to that within a bell Duchess Kegan will be crossing the river with a party to treat with us. If you're to be part of the conference, you will need to be briefed."

I smiled at the Taghreb, cursing viciously inside. Well, there went my plan to work on Ranker for a day or two before talking with the Deoraithe. One of these days, I was going to force Fate into a physical manifestation and then I was going to *stab* it.

## Chapter 23: Reassessment

*"From small slights, long prices."*

– Deoraithe proverb

For all that the marshal's envoy had impressed upon me the urgency of the situation, I found myself waiting. The balustrade overlooked an inside courtyard, and from my perch I watched the soldiers milling below. I'd left a line of the Gallowborne down there along with Robber and a line from his cohort. My personal retinue wouldn't be mingling with the goblins, but the Special Tribune and his men were not so distant. They were, perhaps, a little *too* friendly. I winced when Robber rolled all over the paving stones, clawing at another goblin's eyes and cackling loudly. Their sharp nails drew blood on each other, but aside from my own visibly horrified Callowans none of the legionaries seemed anything but amused. The other greenskin was larger – likely from a Matron lineage, then, since those were supposed to be bigger and smarter than other goblins – but my own bastard was younger and more vicious. It ended with him sitting atop his opponent, licking the blood off his fingers to the cheers of all the goblins in the courtyard.

The door my back was turned to opened silently, but my senses had gotten even sharper since Arcadia. I could feel the air moving, almost, and the soft creep of leather boots headed for me. The

only other person in the room came to stand by my side at the balustrade, deftly climbing atop a stone seat so they'd be able to lean their elbows against the edge like I did. I didn't show surprise, or even bother to turn around. I already knew who it was, and years of dealing with Robber had taught me the dangers of allowing a goblin to set the beat of a conversation.

"Tribe?" a soft voice asked.

"Rock Breaker," I replied.

Marshal Ranker chuckled, the sound a dry rasp.

"I can see why a barren old bitch like Weaver would get rid of him," she said.

Only then did I glance at the small, wrinkled old woman that was one of the three most important commanders in the Legions of Terror. Marshal Ranker's skin looked like leather left out too long in the sun, all cracked and dry and a brown-green that was unpleasant to look at. Her face was a curtain of heavy wrinkles leading to thin brown lips and a pointed chin. Her eyes, though, had me wary. Deep set and dark, with small threads of red in the sclera. This one was ancient, by the standards of her people, and old goblins were either dead or exceedingly dangerous. The infamous blackened hand her legion was named for was curled and unmoving, looking crippled for good, but I knew better than to take anything shown by this woman as face value.

"Her loss," I said. "His record speaks for itself."

The goblin clicked her tongue.

"That boy learned his lessons too well," she said. "We tell them they're supposed to be fearless, but that's a lie. They're still supposed to be afraid of *us*."

Of the Matrons. I didn't know much about the Tribes, not that anybody did, but what little I'd learned from Robber and Pickler had not endeared their ruling class to me. It had always been absurd to me to wrest authority out of the hands of the capable because of some arbitrary objection to those capable individuals having bollocks. If there was one aspect of Black's philosophy I had wholeheartedly embraced, it was that power belonged in the hands of the competent – wasting talent out of petty bias was to lessen all those involved.

"Fear's never enough," I said. "Not on its own."

"Empires have been built on less," the Marshal snorted.

"Not this one," I said.

There was a pause.

"And yet you crucified them," Ranker said.

"They crossed me," I replied. "Some fear was required."

I got a bark of harsh laughter for that.

"Marshal Ranker, of the Hungry Dog tribe," she finally introduced herself.

"Catherine Foundling," I said. "Duchess of Moonless Nights."

"I'm aware," the goblin lightly replied. "As I'm sure you are that you've had crossbows pointed at you since you first stepped into Denier."

I smiled wryly.

"You're not going to mention the fact that this entire room is rigged with demolition charges?" I asked.

Smell was a sense as well, and I'd learned to recognize the sharp tang of goblin munitions.

"Much like you weren't going to mention you sent your Adjutant to poke around the city," she replied.

"He's not a spymaster," I shrugged. "Just a friendly orc who likes to share a drink."

"The dangerous ones always smile," the Marshal said.

I snorted.

"I've been advised you're not someone to trifle with," I told her.

"I considered trapping your little crew in an avenue and setting the whole thing aflame with green," Ranker casually said. "Your tiff with the Empress has poor timing. But that would trigger another uprising, and that'd be even more trouble than you."

The sheer nonchalance she'd just admitted that with was chilling, but I was no stranger to cold these days.

"All I'm doing is hacking off the dead wood," I said. "And there's a great deal of that. You've been around long enough for-"

"Save me the speech, Duchess," the goblin interrupted cuttingly. "I'm not one of your lapdogs, and whatever hopes you're peddling I don't care for. I'm a fucking Marshal of the Dread Empire, kid. I know where my loyalties lie. If it comes to it, I'll kill you if only to spare Amadeus the pain of doing the deed himself."

"The way things used to be done in Callow won't work anymore," I said. "You have to be aware of that."

The Marshal hacked out a laugh.

"And whose fault is that? I read Sacker's report on Summerholm. The Liesse Rebellion is as good as your doing. You set up that highborn chit in the south who's giving us trouble now, too, and to add insult to fucking injury you're taking advantage of an invasion to make a power grab," she said. "As far as I'm concerned the only difference between you and those poor bastards you nailed to crosses is that you have a bigger stick and catchier battle cry."

"I actually have a purpose, unlike those 'poor bastards'," I replied coldly. "And I'll see it through no matter how much wailing comes from the gallery."

"I've been threatened by scarier Named than you, Duchess," Ranker said. "And I'll say this for the Chancellor – he wasn't dumb enough to do it in my own territory. You've risen quickly, and we all know how that story goes. The fall comes as quickly, and twice as hard. Take care not to drop your carcass on anything I care about."

I sighed.

"Are we just going to stand around trading veiled threats all day?" I said. "I was under the impression Duchess Kegan was headed our way."

"There is no *us*," the Marshal said. "You're one conversation gone south away from rebellion. And you have some sort of plan for the Deoraithe. Out with it. If it has to come to steel, let's get it out of the way."

"You wouldn't leave this room alive if it did," I said flatly.

Ranker eyed me with those dark, deep-set eyes.

"No," she agreed. "But neither would you."

I'd seen that look in the faces of people before. William's, when he'd decided to call Contrition onto Liesse. Akua's, when she'd told me she would collapse the dimension were were in if I refused to negotiate. Ranker wasn't Named – she lacked the feelings of power and weight both – but she did have that kind of resolution to her. She would, if she found my intentions unacceptable, rather bring down this entire place on our heads than allow me to go through with them. I'd never had that goblin razor-sharp fearlessness turned on me before, and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. Could I kill her before she even spoke an order? I had no doubt. I shouldn't, though. There was nothing to

gain from it, and it worried me the urge was there. Kilian's soft accusation that I hated to compromise came back to my ears, along with the bundle of things I still felt about that conversation I'd set aside rather than deal with. Had I become too used to getting my way? Or maybe it was subtler than that. I'd won often enough that the idea of losing even in a small way had me reaching for violence. Because Ranker would be beating me, by coercing me into revealing my hand like this. That was a fact.

The surrender of control rankled. I'd stayed in this room even after smelling the munitions because I'd believed that whatever measures she had taken they wouldn't be able to kill me. I'd done that even after being told by the person I trusted most in the world that I was dealing with a real threat. Stupid. More than that, I'd been *arrogant*. Ranker had survived the death of more powerful villains than me. *This isn't a mistake I would have made a year ago.* I would have liked to blame this on my Name, on whatever the Winter King had done to me, but that felt like a cheap excuse. I'd gotten so used to reaping the lives of non-Named like wheat I'd stopped seeing them as truly dangerous, and that was the kind of conceit that got people killed. I wasn't in a small pond anymore. I'd reached the sea, and the things that lurked in it would gobble me up if I didn't start stepping more carefully. I breathed out. *Decide on your objective,* I told myself, returning to Black's old mantra. *Decide what lines you're willing to cross to get to it.* If I retreated here, all I lost was pride.

Perhaps I could use a little less of that.

"I want take Kegan's army through Arcadia," I said. "And use it on my enemies. The fae first, then Diabolist."

"And why would she agree to that?" the Marshal asked.

"Because I know what she wants," I said. "And I can help her get it before it's too late."

The wrinkled goblin looked down at the legionaries in the courtyard.

"We can deal," she finally said.

—

We met the Deoraithe at nightfall.

Only ten of them came across the fishing boat, but they did not need to be any more: nine of those wore the brown-grey cloaks of the Watch, longbows strapped on their backs and longswords at their hips. I'd never fought a full-fledged member of the order once charged with manning the Wall protecting Daoine from orc incursions, but I knew better than to underestimate them. Even

the half-baked observer they'd sent to the Lone Swordsman's side had managed to put an arrow in my back barely an inch away from my spine. I still had the scar, a pink puckered star on the tan skin of my back. The tenth, then, must have been Duchess Kegan Iarsmai. The woman was short – though still taller than me – and learn, with always-moving brown eyes and the stride of someone used to others following behind. She wore no highborn clothes, only hardened leather armour with the crest of her house on the chest. The Duchess had forgone a helmet, allowing her long dark curls to stream down her back. She was not ugly, but neither was she pretty: her features were hawkish and her middle-aged bearing carved of sternness.

Our side of the negotiations was less uniform in nature. Marshal Ranker had taken a tenth of hardened Soninke and Taghreb regulars with her, while I'd picked a tenth from the Gallowborne. Callowans, mostly, but also two orcs. They were ten steps behind myself and the sole goblin on the scene, and the looming silhouettes of the Watch stayed at the same distance when the Duchess advanced. She glanced at Ranker with open dislike, then frowned at the sight of me.

"'Evening," I said. "I'm–"

"Lady Catherine Foundling," Kegan cut through. "We have paintings of you. Marshal, I was not made aware there would be a Named tonight."

"A last moment adjustment," Ranker replied. "But not unfitting. She does have to authority to treat with you."

The Duchess turned her eyes to me.

"Daoine is not subject to the Ruling Council," she said bluntly. "Nor will it ever be. Our tributary arrangements with the Tower need no broker."

"Not what I'm here for," I said. "I hear you have an army assembled on the other side of the river."

"That is none of your concern, Squire," she said.

She glared, at both me and Creation in general.

"Ancestors save us from meddlesome children," she muttered in the Old Tongue.

"I also speak that," I replied in the same.

She offered me a sneer.

"Poorly," she replied.



Ouch. That actually kind of stung. Wasn't my fault it was a hellishly complicated language. Even Alamani wasn't as bad, and people from other parts of the Principate preferred speaking Lower Miezian than learning the language.

"You're not crossing, Kegan," Ranker informed her.

"You think a second legion and whatever the Carrion's Lord apprentice brought will be enough to stop me?" the duchess coldly replied. "No amount of traps will be enough to turn me back. I am due, Marshal."

"It would be," I shrugged. "I've beat worse odds, Watch or no. But I'd rather avoid a fight."

"Then *get out of our way*," the Deoraithe hissed. "My debt lies not with the Tower."

"I know," I said.

"So how many did the chit take?" Ranker asked. "Twelve? Fifteen? Surely not twenty. You can't have gotten *that* soft since the Conquest."

"The man who beat us at the Wall is a *long* way from Denier, goblin," Kegan said. "Do not make me teach the two of you what we have learned since those defeats."

"You won't get there in time," I said, and her eyes went back to me.

"You know not what you speak of," the duchess said.

"I know Akua Sahelian a lot better than you do," I smiled thinly. "You'd have to march through the entire span of Callow, and if you force the crossing you'll be doing it with the Empire harassing you the whole time. She knows that. She *planned* that. By the time you get to Liesse, she'll have finished whatever ritual she's cooking up."

"I wanted answers from you, but I already obtained them," the Marshal said. "What we have now is terms."

"For *what*?" Duchess Kegan asked.

I rolled my shoulder, delighting in the crack.

"Allowing you to use my shortcut," I said.

## Interlude – Apprentice

*"The source of wonder and horror is the same, and the boundary between them thinner than you would think."*

– Dread Empress Sanguinia I

"That is a Count, I believe," Masego announced.

Father's spectacles were of no use at this range, so he'd had to use his Name. An aspect, more specifically – **Glimpse**. Apprentice disliked relying on the power conferred onto him by the Gods Below, as he'd always considered it something of a crutch that would cripple his ability to improve his casting without such means, but he could not deny the abilities it lent him had their uses. Even from a mile away, behind a set of obscuring wards, he'd been able to gauge the forces animating the Summer fae. The intensity and breadth of those forces were inferior to those of the Dukes and Duchesses he'd observed in Skade but superior to those of a Baron. There were outliers, of course. The Lady of Cracking Ice had been by an order of magnitude stronger than the other nobles accompanying her in the initial meeting even though her title was the lowest. He suspected the rough equivalent of Roles that was carved into the consciousness of fae was the true factor behind the power those entities could muster, but without proper investigation it was impossible to turn this into a credible thesis.

Regardless, this particular fae seemed to have the power common for one titled Count. The power of his Name keeping his eyes from blinking, Masego studied the fluctuations in the forces. A shame the Count was not in range of his spectacles. One of the enchantments on them helped him quantify the energies at play in a way his aspect simply could not. Still, the actual forces did not seem greater by a significant margin than those of the same-titled Winter fae he had studied. The qualitative difference that allegedly allowed Summer to win every time open war was waged between those Courts must have come from a different source. Nature of the energy, perhaps? The symbolic properties of fire and ice as per the table of classic elements were cleansing and preservation – typically, aggressive properties won over defensive ones when diametrically opposed. Could it be that simple? The dark-skinned mage itched for ink and parchment, but it would have to wait.

"I told you," Archer crowed. "We just need to keep shooting stronger ones in the head and eventually a big one will show up."

"That is a vast oversimplification of still poorly understood social dynamics," Masego replied peevishly.

"You know, really smart people don't actually need to use long words," the ochre-skinned woman grinned.

That was such a brutal insult that Apprentice remained too appalled to reply for a solid thirty heartbeats. By that time, Archer had strung that ridiculously large longbow of hers. Even with the power of his aspect having faded away, Masego could see the sorcery worked into it. The wood, already magical in nature and likely from the Waning Woods, had been further strengthened and so had the string. It was, in his estimation, physically impossible for anyone but a Named to successfully draw that bow. Even then, what the woman was preparing to do seemed rather dubious.

"He's a mile away," Apprentice said. "There is a breeze. Longbow range is, at best, four hundred yards. Useless against armoured targets past two hundred. The distance you are aiming at is over four times that."

"That's very impressive," Archer grinned. "Learned all those pretty numbers from a book, did you?"

Masego had, in fact, learned those numbers from a book on military tactics he'd borrowed from Hakram. He coughed to hide the blush that touched his cheeks at being caught out.

"For a mortal, those numbers matter a lot," the woman said, eyes hooded with pleasure. "For a Named, they matter a little. For *me*, though?"

Her grin turned sharp.

"If I can **See** it, I can kill it."

Vision-driven aspect? Given her Name, it was only logical. Masego's train of thought was interrupted by the sight of Archer on the move, and for an instant that was all that filled his mind. He'd fought at this woman's side before, but he had never witnessed her in action with a bow – only seen the arrows she shot. Archer moved so swiftly he saw only a blur, string taut and then loose as the first arrow flew. Another two followed before a heartbeat had passed. Merciless Gods. His eyes followed the last arrow, studying the properties as it flew. They were silent, and so clearly enchanted. No, he realized, not enchanted. Made of material with natural sorcery. *Inherent properties*, he understood with a sharp intake of breath. Silence, and some kind of amplification. Sharpness or penetration, he could not tell. It did not matter. Most defensive wards relied on the assumption that any projectiles targeting them would be either entirely mundane or have an active sorcerous component to them, more commonly called an enchantment. The arrows Archer had used would sail right through those, qualifying as neither by the strictures of sorcery. Mage-killers. That was what those projectiles were.

As a child he'd often lingered around Father and Uncle Amadeus whenever they used Imperial business as an excuse to have drinks

and bicker, and one of his favourite games had been 'could you beat'. He'd demanded a plan for the two of them to vanquish everyone from the Dead King to a company of legendary heroes, and always been given an answer. Until he'd asked them for the plan to fight Ranger. The two of them had traded looks, and then his uncle had smiled over his cup. *Don't*, he'd replied. Watching that woman's foremost apprentice at work, he was beginning to grasp why. The Count didn't realize he was being targeted until the first arrow took him in the chest. Fire flared as he fell, but the second arrow nailed his shoulder to the ground anyway. The third went through his left knee, immobilizing him for good.

"Do your stuff," Archer said, waving her hand like she'd not shot a godling thrice in broad daylight.

Masego gathered enough concentration to activate the dispersed components he'd left around the area where'd they killed the last two patrols. The Count rose into the air, shackles of chirping light forming around his limbs. That should keep him prisoner for the duration they needed, and so the first step of their plan was complete. Apprentice dispersed the obscuration ward around them, since neither of them were using their Names anymore, and began the walk to their prisoner. It'd been over a month since Catherine had sent them south to 'bait the Summer Court into attacking the Diabolist'. Masego had been assured that the notion made strategic sense, not that he particularly cared. Only now did he realized that Catherine had used his eagerness to secure some high-quality fae specimens to rope him into doing actual work. Truly, she was becoming more ruthless every month. That was how *he'd* been talked into going south, anyhow, but he'd wondered why Archer had acquiesced and asked her as much. She'd been sent as a fae expert on loan from Refuge, not a soldier to be used in the Squire's wars.

"Eh, just staying with the army would have been boring," she'd replied. "Hakram's not even around to spar with anymore."

Adjutant had informed him over one of their nightly games of shatranj that those 'spars' mostly consisted of Archer beating him black and blue until she felt like having a drink, which thankfully was frequent. He believed the orc. The foreign-looking woman had brought more drink than rations in her haversack on their trek south, and insisted they stop at villages to replenish her stock.

"That seems like a thin motivation," he'd said.

"The idea of screwing over Sahelian does give me the good kind of shivers," the woman had admitted. "And, well..."

Ah, he'd thought. He could understand the unspoken reason as well. As a boy he'd sometimes wondered why his father did not lead the Calamities. He was the most powerful among them, after

all, capable of wiping a city off the face of Creation in a single night. He'd always liked Uncle Amadeus, but like did not usually enter the equation when it came to villains. The strongest held command, that was the natural order. Now, though? He'd learned better. Masego could probably kill Catherine, if he truly put his mind to it. Two days of preparation required at least, but it was doable even with the power she'd gained in Arcadia. He didn't want to, though, and not just because taking up her burdens would be atrociously inconvenient to his research.

She had a way about her, that... It was hard to explain. Sometimes he thought of it as akin to the way smaller celestial orbs circled around larger ones, but that ignored some fundamental aspects of it. It was warm and nice and almost addictive, being part of the family around Catherine Foundling. That heady sense of *belonging*, the way that when she talked you believed there was nothing you couldn't do. Apprentice did not enjoy 'adventures', as a rule, but he believed his life would be lesser if he'd not followed Squire on them. And so he did not ask any further questions of Archer, because neither of them would be comfortable with where that conversation would take them. Some things were best left unsaid, and in the end he was not inclined to bare much of himself to this stranger. For all that it was nigh impossible to get the woman to shut up, Masego still knew next to nothing about her or what she was capable of. This was not, he thought, a coincidence.

They hurried on the way to the Count. His scrying ritual, adapted to notice the outskirts of the presence of fae instead of looking at them directly and facing the full backlash, had told him there were no patrols closer than half a day's march. Still, their actions today were as good as lighting a beacon for anyone looking for them. They needed to be gone before anyone came looking, if this was to work. Which he wasn't sure it would. Neither of them, as it turned out, were particularly good at planning. Apprentice usually let Catherine and Hakram handle this sort of menial work, and Archer had admitted that her plans usually didn't go much further than 'fight the enemy until it died'. He'd agreed to sharing a drink with the woman only once on their way south, when they'd come up with their plan to push Summer to attack the Diabolist. They'd tried to guess why Liesse had not been attacked yet, when the two cities to its flanks had already been taken by Summer. Masego had eventually mentioned the ancient but powerful wards protecting the city, and the other Named had agreed that those would give fae pause. They were, after all, exceptionally sensitive to boundaries.

They needed, therefore, to make it easier for Summer to attack the city. Sadly, neither of them knew anything about military tactics. Apprentice *had*, however, made a comprehensive map of the wards in the walls of Liesse before the battle of the same name. Leaking that information should help, they'd agreed. So he'd

written it down on a parchment, they'd located a small fae patrol and handed it to them. Or tried to, at least. The fae captain had ordered them to immediately kneel and swear allegiance to the Queen of Summer or be destroyed, Archer had offered them a drink instead and they'd rather taken offence to that. A quarter hour later, they had five fae corpses she'd had to kill with a broken bottle and they weren't anywhere closer to their objective. They'd tried again, attracting another small patrol and just leaving the scroll with the information on the ground while hiding. The fae had torched it and ordered a search of the region. Five other corpses later, they'd agreed that diplomacy did not seem to be working. Alternatives were needed.

Wondering what Father and Papa would do in a similar situation Masego had arrived to the conclusion that capturing a fae and rewriting their mind so the information was inside it before releasing them to the Court was the most expedient solution. Archer's suggestion that they just carve all the details on the corpses of the fae was clearly flawed, since there was no guaranteed they wouldn't just torch the corpses on sight like that had the scroll. They'd ambushed a third patrol, keeping the captain alive and Apprentice had taken out his tools to tinker with the forces that passed for the creature's soul. Frustratingly, there hadn't been enough room. As entities who did not *learn*, per se, there was no space inside the mind of the fae for much aside what was already there. Carving out some unnecessary things like the ability to see or the knowledge of how to use sorcery had resulted in unmoving bodies with blank eyes. Worse, apparently removing the ability to move stopped them breathing as well – that was just poor design, he'd complained. Archer had suggested they abduct several captains and spread the information across them, but that would both take long and risk more inaccuracies the more operations he had to do.

"We need a bigger fish, then," Archer had suggested.

"We're in a landlocked region of Callow," Apprentice had reasonably pointed out.

She'd called him a condescending pedant, he'd called her rampantly ignorant and they'd eventually agreed that a more powerful fae was needed. Simply flaring their Names wouldn't work, since for all they knew it might draw an entire army. Archer had then introduced the notion of ambushing a patrol and then remaining close by, then killing the fae who came to investigate until one holding a sufficient high title showed up. He hadn't liked the plan, but been unable to come up with a better one. A sennight later, here they were looming over an imprisoned Count. The fae glared at them, only barely conscious.

"How dare you-" he started, but then his mouth closed.

Masego tied off the spell structure and left it active to keep the creature silent. He was in no mood for a rant, not when he had to do such a delicate operation. Reaching into the pocket dimension he'd created after the rebellion, Apprentice took out the leather pack holding his tools in place and casually created a pane of force to hold it. Humming lightly, he took out what looked like a knife so thin it could not possibly cut anything. He looked at the fae and patted the man's shoulder reassuringly.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll cut out the part that dictates pain very early. It shouldn't hurt at all after that."

"It's much less creepy when they don't scream," Archer noted approvingly.

Masego got work.

—

Well, it had worked. More or less. The two of them were hiding in a bush under an obscuration ward, watching the host of Summer spread to surround Liesse. The Diabolist had seen them coming, which had interesting implications. Either Sahelian was using the same indirect scrying he was but more accurately, or she'd found another way entirely. Most likely the second. Wolof had many secrets in its vaults. Regardless, they knew the Diabolist had been aware of the fae headed her way because the army she'd had on the field had retreated behind the walls and was now manning them. As well as a truly impressive amount of devils, Apprentice noted. She must have used a Lesser Breach to gather so much on a short notice. Her skill with sorcery continued to impress. The two Named watched the host of Summer spread across the plain, for it was a sight to see.

Ten thousand fae, he'd estimated. Entire regiments of ivory-armoured fairies stood ramrod straight, spears held high and a river of banners and pennons fluttering in the wind amongst them. Archers armed with longbows of pure white wood stood behind them, feathers not of any creature known to Creation fletching their arrows. Not a single one of them could be called anything but young and beautiful, the ardour of war wafting off them like a fume. Fae bearing trumpets of gold and rubies stood in every regiment, ready to let out the clarion call of conquest that lay in the heart of every Summer fae. A thousand knights in silvery plate sat astride winged horses, long lances and shields of exquisite make in their hands. They were forming in a loose triangle behind the infantry, their mounts stirring eagerly. The nobles stood out starkly from the rest, colourful figures made of fire, steel and silk that warped the air with heat wherever they stood. No two sets of plate they wore were the same, every one a masterpiece that would have made a mortal craftsman weep to look at.

The defenders were no less dreamlike to witness. Praesi soldiers wearing the distinctive colours of the family they were sworn to on their tabards manned the few bastions on the wall, their chainmail blackened dark as a crow's feathers as was the custom in the Wasteland. Their armaments were sharp goblin steel, the finest blades of Calernia put in the hands of men and woman trained from birth to use them in the service of their lord. Between them stood rows upon rows of *walin-falme* devils. Tall and with the dark leathery skin of bats, they wore plate marked with the brand of Wolof: red and black, a curving golden lion inside the splash of colour. These bore spears and axes of cast iron, the metal known to be the ugly death of fae. Spread amongst all of these were small clusters of Taghreb and Soninke in tailored robes, panes of lights inscribed with runes flickering around them. War-mages, the finest the Wasteland had to offer. This was not an army that would go gently, not even against the strength of Summer.

It was a host ripped straight from the old days of blood and darkness, when all of Calernia had feared the sound of Praes at war. It was an ancient dream, this one, but Masego's fathers had taught him better than to love it.

"I forgot to ask before we left, but do we actually want Summer to win?" Archer asked, chewing on dried meat.

Masego blinked, shaken out of his thoughts. While he'd been spellbound, his companion seemed less than impressed.

"You weren't paying attention during the briefing?" he said.

"Nah," she admitted easily. "I figured you would."

Apprentice cursed.

"I thought *you* would," he admitted.

"It's their fault for making it boring, really," Archer said.

"They kept talking about logistics and supply trains," Masego agreed bitterly. "I don't *want* to know anything about those, Hakram."

"I mean, just guessing here," the dark-eyed woman said.

"Foundling wouldn't want all the people inside butchered right?"

"I *think* not," Apprentice said. "She gets irritated about people killing Callowans unless it's her doing it."

"So we don't want Summer to win," Archer pointed out triumphantly. "They do tend to burn stuff a lot. And people. I don't think they understand the difference very well."



"Everybody burns people, it's a common execution method across Calernia," Masego replied absent-mindedly, trying to remember anything about the briefing aside from Adjutant's voice droning and Catherine drinking too much. "I think we may want them both to lose."

"Is that something that happens?" she asked, sounding puzzled.

He glanced at her.

"Have you won every fight you were in?" he asked sceptically.

"Well, no," Archer said. "I spar against the Lady Ranger. Never landed a blow on her unless she allowed me."

Apprentice drew on his extensive military experience, which consisted of three battles where he'd largely spent his time setting people on fire or exploding them when Catherine asked.

"I think it's like shatranj," he mused. "You know, towards the end of the game when most pieces have been taken. We want them both to lose pieces."

Archer glanced at the city and grimaced.

"I think we may have given Summer a bit too much of an advantage," she said.

Masego followed her eyes and paled. One of the fae, on a winged horse, had ridden up to the city walls. The volley of arrows shot at her burst into flame and scattered into ashes long before they got close, and it only got worse from there: a torrent of heat formed in front of her and impacted the walls, beginning to melt the stone. Well, that was one way to beat the wards. They could not be held back by the boundary if there was no boundary.

"This is bad," Archer decided.

The Diabolist, though, did not flinch. A heartbeat later Apprentice's ward shivered as a large-scale ritual triggered. The waves of sorcery coming from Liesse were almost enough to scatter it, though when he had a **Glimpse** at the city he saw this was but a sliver of what had been at play. Slowly, Liesse and the ground under it began to rip their ways out of the soil. *And only this much wasted power?* he thought. At least a mile around the city should have been turned into a wasteland, for something this large. The Diabolist seemed to have managed to keep it all within a hair's breadth of Keter's Due, which meant this working might have had the single most efficient ritual array in Praesi history. He was itching to have a look at it even as Liesse rose into the air and kept rising, tons of soil falling out from under it. He could almost see the array itself, what had gone into activating it. This was no mere blood sacrifice, she'd used fae

to fuel it and, just for a moment, the Apprentice touched something greater than himself. A larger truth still beyond his understanding, a mystery in the almost religious sense of the term, and though he could not grasp it just witnessing part was almost enough to... And then the moment was gone. He was shivering and more excited than he had been in years. He'd nearly transitioned into another Name, just by looking at this. He was close. In the distance, the host of Summer lit up a thousand bright colours as their wings formed. The soldiers and devils on the walls prepared to meet the assault.

"We have, technically, accomplished the task we were sent south for," Masego said.

Archer looked at the army of Summer taking flight.

"Retreat?" she finally asked.

Streaks of sorcery filled the sky with sounds like thunder. As devils spread their wings and the battle began in earnest.

"For now," Apprentice said. "We'll be back."

## **Villainous Interlude: Exeunt**

*"If Creation is not mine, what need is there to be a Creation at all?"*

– Dread Empress Triumphant, First and Only of Her Name

"They think they have us cornered," Fasili said.

There was laughter in that tone, the intonation he used in Mtethwa implying mocking irony – he'd inflected the word for 'think' with the same sound as the one for 'fool'. Winds were whipping at the city wildly as it rose into the sky, the power Akua had called ripping Liesse from solid ground and casting it up. The aftermath of the ritual she'd called on still burned in her bones, pulsing in time with her heartbeat. It was the largest working she'd ever undertaken, dwarfing even the two Lesser Breaches she'd made in her lifetime, and it had been exhilarating. The traces of that monstrous sorcery would permeate the region for decades to come, long after every trace of the fae currently trampling it were gone. Standing atop the highest bastion of the city gates, the Diabolist and her mortal second-in-command were watching the army of Summer splayed below. A host of legend, she conceded as she studied the glittering ranks. But she had one as well and it would not come out the lesser of this strife.

There were two princes and a princess among the ranks of the enemy, the strongest hand the Summer Court could play without sending its own Queen into battle. One of those stood head and

shoulders above the others: the same princess who'd forced Diabolist to trigger her ritual early when she'd begun melting the ramparts with brute force. Given the cascading nature of the wards woven into the walls, if she'd been left at it much longer the entire outer rampart would have crumbled along with most of the dark-skinned aristocrat's army. No matter. Akua had planned to use the ritual as soon as the enemy made their move anyway, though she'd expected an assault of thousands and not a single fae. The highest caste of the Fair Folk was nothing to sneer at, she acknowledged. Among all the entities she could call on nothing but a handful of obscenely ancient devils could match their power. She had three of these summoned, as it happened, a perfectly symmetrical match. The Gods Below sometimes saw fit to hand gifts to their most faithful, and who else but she could still claim that title?

"The harvest has been plentiful," Diabolist said. "Let us reap the benefits in full."

The ritual array for turning Liesse into a flying fortress-city was not the one she'd been building for all these months, of course. A ritual so straightforward would not have required Akua to sink all the resources at her disposal into the city. No, all she'd done was activate a secondary array, one she'd originally designed as a security measure in case the Legions of Terror came calling too early. It was the reason she'd allowed all those refugees from the south behind her walls, even if like rodents they ate up her granaries: hey could serve as acceptable fuel in a pinch. Ultimately, that had proved unnecessary. She'd managed to acquire a Duchess of Summer with her traps before needing to retreat and the fae noble had been more than enough for the purpose. Diabolist preferred this outcome, as it happened. Keeping the city full of refugees should stay Foundling's hand when the hour of reckoning came. And if didn't? Well, there were always uses for such large quantities of lifeblood.

The High Lords of Praes knew how to turn massacre into power better than anyone else, living or dead.

What had finally driven the fae to attack, she wondered? Was it taking a Duchess? The reaction seemed too delayed for that, weeks passing before the attack came. Until recently they'd been content to fight her in the plains of the south, rightfully wary of the wards protecting her stronghold. Akua's instincts were that Foundling had a hand in this, but the latest news had her in Laure crucifying fools. The Diabolist had had to resist the urge to roll her eyes, when she'd heard resistance had been attempted after Squire had entered the city. As if the likes of Satang Motherless and Murad Kalbid had it in them to thwart the likes of Catherine Foundling. Akua's enemy had flaws, but she was a power worthy of the Name she had claimed and growing more Praesi by the year. A pair of castoffs from the Wasteland were nothing more

than dust in the face of that. More interesting was the way Squire had been able to travel so quickly. Given Foundling's recent journey in the realm of the fae, Akua was inclined to believe she was carving paths through Arcadia to move faster than Creation permitted.

A fascinating notion that, one that while not unknown – the Calamities had done the same on occasion and there were records of heroes doing so as well – had never been used on this scale before. It was one thing for a handful of Named to hurry through the outskirts of Arcadia, quite another for an army to march through the territory of the Courts. Whatever had happened in Winter after Squire wandered inside its boundaries, she'd gained great power there. Measures would have to be taken so she couldn't pull the same trick on the Diabolist, but that was a notion for later. Today, after all, Akua Sahelian was going to war. The phrase, even as an idle thought, set her blood aflame. It felt *right*. It felt like she was finally touching upon what she had always been meant to be, unsheathing a blade for the first time after years of forging it. Liesse reached the height it was meant to and then ceased ascending, stabilizing in its flight. Beneath her the wings of the fae coming for her head lit up the field and the winged cavalry began its charge upwards. Clarions sounded, piercing the afternoon afternoon air like blades. The call of Summer. From the walls of Liesse, a hundred hide drums began to beat. Doom, doom, doom they announced. *Praes is at war. Tremble, any who stand in its way.*

"Lord Fasili," she said. "Take command of the army. I will be joining the fray."

"May you blot out their horizon forever, my lady," the Soninke replied, bowing.

There was fervour in his eyes. He too understood what this battle stood for: in this twilight of the Age of Wonders, the last true sons and daughters of Praes had taken up arms. *Oh, you poor fools of Summer. Twilight is the coming of night, and night has ever been our time. We will own the dark and shape the day that comes after it.* Adjusting her long crimson, Akua breathed in the wind and reached for her Name. It was pulsing inside her still, like the blood in her veins, as much a birth right as the rest. **Call**, she whispered inside her mind, and as her aspect rose to the surface her mind unfolded across miles. A small sliver of it inside every devil she had brought into Creation, an iron shard inside their very being that shackled them to her will. This was more than the mere bindings her ancestors had managed. It was ownership in truth, the kind of tyranny that had once been the sole province of those who climbed the Tower.

"Fly," she ordered, and every one of them heard the words. "Scatter all that opposes me."

A full thousand *walin-falme* spread their leather wings instantly. Her harvest had been bountiful indeed: once she'd thought she would have only four hundred to call on, but the revolving wards designed by her father had allowed her to capture so many fae she'd managed over twice that. The devils took flight eagerly, screaming promises of death in the Dark Tongue. Diabolist could have called on a flying chariot to carry her to war, but it would have only slowed her down: rising smoothly over the edge of the rampart, she strode onto the afternoon sky. Beneath her feet glass-like panels of force appeared and she strolled towards the wave of enemies filling the air. Only one other person did the same: the man who'd taught her this spell, her father. The first wave of fae rising through the air reached him before they did her, but she was not worried and for good reason. Without Papa so much as raising a hand, all the enemies that came close to him started... bubbling up under their skin, before simply exploding in bursts of flame. Smiling at the sight, Diabolist glanced at the insolent things headed for her. A swarm of ivory and steel, flying pennants of red and gold. Doom, doom, doom the drums sounded. A promise, an oath.

"Justice," the fae clamoured.

"Death," Diabolist replied, and granted it to them.

High Arcana runes light up around her, coming easier than they ever have before, and the air in front of the enemy formed into a ball that condensed for three heartbeats before detonating with a sound like thunder. A hundred fae were swatted down like flies, their bright wings winking out, and twice as many were tossed aside by the impact. Raw power pumped through her veins, her very Name feeding on the sight of her supremacy. The tide of fae swallowed her up as the enemy host headed for the walls, while in the distance the winged cavalry charged straight into her swarm of devils. The melee that ensued was brutal, cast iron in furious eldritch hands smashing into the silvery arms of the Summer Court's peerless knights. Diabolist paid it no further mind, as waves of fae were falling upon her.

"Seven lanterns, lit and smothered," she incanted. "I have spilled blood and broken bone, known the desert sun and offered pure incense."

High Arcana wove itself into her words, every syllable shaping the runes according to her will as if she were painting with sorcery.

"Howl, hunger, hollow. Threefold is my will: obey, winds."

When it came to wind sorcery, not even the finest of the Soninke could match the Taghreb. A current of bone-dry wind formed at her back, sweeping around her and gathering all the fae that had been approaching her with it. Laughing, she quickened the sweep and

broadened it until the dozen soldiers she'd first caught became hundreds. The current of air, full of flesh and steel, formed into a ball above her head when her hands rose. Her fingers formed a fist and with a sick *crunch* metal and bodies alike shattered. Her veins burning at the power she still held onto, Diabolist flicked down her hand and flung the ball into the enemy ranks – it carved a line through them, though killed precious few.

"It seems mere soldiers are no match for the likes of you," a voice spoke from ahead.

A pale woman with golden hair, her scale armour a different shade of green in every scale, stared at her calmly. Sword in hand, she saluted gallantly.

"I am the Countess of First Bloom," she introduced herself.

Diabolist closed her eyes. She could feel the fae landing on the walls, fighting her soldiers and dying in droves as wards and goblin steel carved through them. Her mages snuffed out fae lives with streaks of lightning and darkness, sending rituals old as Wolof into the throngs of assailants. Streams of lesser devils poured out of summoning circles, a storm of shrieks and claws that died as quick as they came into existence but left behind bleeding limbs and tired hands. Deaths, so many deaths, of both mortals and fae. Every one of them permeating Creation with strands of power.

"In the name of my Queen, I consign you to death by the flames of Summer," the Countess announced, irritated by the lack of response.

Diabolist smiled.

"I will teach you," she said. "What fire truly is."

**Claim**, she spoke silently. Her third aspect, and the one worthiest of a ruler. In a heartbeat, all those strands of power shivered and fell under her authority. The aristocrat gathered them to her, siphoning them into the spell she'd begun crafting even as she spoke.

"Burn, misbegotten creature," the Countess of First Bloom cried out.

Heat turned to fire, a torrent of bright golden flames pouring out towards the Diabolist. She was a mighty thing, this Countess. But not mightier than a thousand deaths made sorcery. Akua's silhouette was wreathed in power, for a heartbeat, and then for a hundred feet in every direction the sky turned into a nightmare of dark flame. Not quite hellfire, but centuries of mages in Wolof had managed to craft the closest thing to it a mortal could

manage. A hundred grasping hands and hungry maws of flame devoured the noble fae and any foolish soldier who'd come too close to the struggle. The golden flames that had arrogantly attempted to take her life were buried and smothered, the hellish scene lasting for thirty heartbeats before disappearing in a curtain of wisps. There was nothing left of the Countess, not even blackened bones. The Diabolist stood alone in the sky, the fae soldiers parting around her like a receding tide. She had not taken a second step since first casting. Doom, doom, doom the drums sounded.

The walls were holding, by a thread. Her soldiers died like dogs under fae spears and swords, but wherever Summer gained a foothold sorcery scoured the walls clean. The casualties were brutal, but what did she care when her dead men rose within moments to hold their blades again? Her thousand devils had lost the clash against the winged knights, but taken a toll: half her *walin-falme* were gone, but so was a third of Summer's most dangerous soldiers. Papa, bored with simply allowing fae to die on his defences, had gone to toy with them. Now they were fighting an enormous snake of green lightning, dispersing it with their lances only to find it forming again behind them and having left a few smoking corpses in its wake. It was only when a Duke went to duel him that her father retreated to the walls, activating a set of wards to force him back before joining the defence. The three greatest of her devils were there as well, Diabolist saw. They towered above the rest, but there was a reason they were not with the lesser devils she had meant them to command: the same princess who'd almost collapsed her walls had landed atop the rampart, and after burning clean any Praesi who came close to her had begun to fight all three at the same time.

She was, the Diabolist realized with dismay, *winning*. Of her three great devils the one she could see most clearly was a massive creature of rippling ebony muscle, two large sets of horns growing atop his hairless head. Jenge Kubawa, he was called. The Lord of Despair, a devil from the Twenty-Seventh Hell said to have once held back the invading army of Aksum for a day on his own, in the days before the Miezani. Akua watched the fae princess rip out one of his horns, shove it into his throat and follow through with a burst of flame that burst straight through his chest and out his back. She would have to go and handle that situation. Still, that left the two princes unaccounted for, which was even more worrying. Where were they – ah.

"A praiseworthy resistance, for mortals," a man said contemptuously, tone belying his words.

Two fae stood in the sky across her, neither of them using their wings. Without even needing to exert their power the air around them warped from the heat, idle mirages flickering at the corner of her vision. The one who'd spoken was dark-skinned like a

Soninke, though his pure white hair lent him an unsightly appearance. He was, otherwise, beautiful – and his armour of burnt stone was touched with red veins that made it look like burning coal. Against his shoulder a spear of pure crystal rested. The other one was pale and dark-haired, his perfectly-cropped beard looking sharp enough to cut flesh. He wore no armour, only long robes of woven sunlight and flame. His fingers delicately clasped around a sword of pure gold, runes inscribed on the flat of the blade ever-moving. She knew better than to look in any of their eyes. Doom, doom, doom the drums went.

"I am the Prince of Deep Drought," the pale one said with a beautiful smile. "Would you be the Lady Diabolist?"

"A presumptuous question to ask, when half your party has not introduced themselves," Akua replied.

The dark-skinned one sneered.

"I am the Prince of Burning Embers, mortal," he said. "*Kneel.*"

The weight of the order struck her like a blow, but Diabolist was indifferent. The soul he was trying to command was far, far away. She would not need it for some time yet.

"I am Akua Sahelian," she replied. "You may yet survive, if you swear yourself to me."

The Prince of Deep Drought looked sympathetic.

"My lady, though my brother spoke uncouthly the sentiment was correct," he said. "This battle is lost. Sulia will destroy your devils, your army will fail and you cannot hope to triumph against two princes of Summer. Surrender to us, and make obeisance to our Queen. You can find fulfilment in her service."

"I cannot win, can I?" the Diabolist asked.

"That is the truth," the Prince of Deep Drought agreed.

Akua smiled.

"I have two truths for you in return," she said. "I am a villain, and *this is the first part of my plan.*"

Out of instinct, the two of them began moving. Too late.

"**Bind,**" Akua said, calling on her final aspect.

It was meant to force devils to her will, this power of hers, but fae were not of Creation either. This and the sheer power of the entities before her limited what she could accomplish, but in the end this lay at the heart of her Name: to be the Diabolist was to hold power over creatures foreign to the world. The Prince of



Burning Embers jerked, then the spear he held spun smoothly and went for his brother's throat. The other prince's eyes widened and he called on fire, his assailant evaded the flames without missing a beat as Akua willed him to do. The fight that followed was swift and merciless. She'd picked the least powerful of the two to bind, but he was clearly more used to combat: the other was a superb swordsman, but relied more on sorcery and Diabolist's puppet simply did not *allow* him to use it. Twice she let the Prince of Burning Embers take hits on purpose, in places that would endanger his life but not his ability to continue using his spear. It would make him easier to finish off afterwards. In the end, she did not manage to kill the Prince of Deep Drought – though the spear tore through his stomach. Feeling her control slip, Diabolist raised an eyebrow.

"Kill yourself," she ordered.

Eyes raging, the Prince of Burning Embers ran his own spear through his heart even as his brother tried to stop him. Runes lit up around Akua as she began using the massive power coming from the death of a Prince of Summer to empower another spell, casually eyeing her remaining opponent.

"Shall we revisit the issue of victory, prince?" she asked.

"Let's," a woman's voice said, and the panels of force that served as Diabolist's shield shattered like glass.

Pain tore through Akua's side as fire claimed her flank, hastily put out by a barked incantation that froze the entire section solid. Gods, how could she not have felt the princess coming towards her? The woman's hair was fire-red, her skin pale and her eyes a terrible thing to behold. Like the heat of the sun made flesh, just being looked upon by them was exhausting.

"I told you two not to get arrogant," Princess Sulia of High Noon said. "Mortals are trickier than Winter, this campaign has proved as much."

Diabolist steadied her breathing and healed the burned flesh on her side. The flames had gone straight through the armour she wore beneath her cloak, ignoring seven layers of enchantments – five of which were meant specifically to ward off fae.

"She *seized* him, Sulia, how could even a Named -" the other fae began, but the princess cut him off.

"We have no stories here," she said. "Except the ones they make. It is madness, rampant madness. Order must be restored. To ashes, if needs must."

"Oh, I quite agree," Diabolist said. "You have no place here. And you've delayed my plans long enough."

The Princess of High Noon eyed her, perfect face disdainful.

"I've no time to waste bantering with cattle, you'll simply have to-"

The fae royalty went still. Akua glanced at the other one – the prince was akin to a statue as well.

"Retreat," Sulia called suddenly, and the word echoed across the entire battlefield. "To Arcadia."

The dark-skinned aristocrat raised an eyebrow.

"But we were only beginning to get acquainted," she said.

The Princess of High Noon bared her teeth.

"We will return, Diabolist," she said. "We will finish this fight, once Summer is no longer being invaded. You and your compatriot laid a cunning trap, I will grant you this much."

Not even a flicker of surprise touched Akua's face. A portal opened and the two fae vanished in the blink of an eye, taking the corpse of the prince before she could do anything. All across the battle gates into Arcadia opened, the host of Summer disappearing through them without warning or explanation. Within twenty heartbeats, there was no one left in sight but her own army. There was a long moment of silence, then a cheer that shook the heavens. The Diabolist remained where she stood, before finally surrendering to a discreet bit of genuine laughter.

"Oh, Squire," she said almost fondly. "You truly are the gift that keeps on giving."

Doom, doom, doom went the drums.

## **Villainous Interlude: Decorum**

*"Morality is a force, not a law. Deviating from it has costs and benefits both – a ruler should weigh those when making a decision, and ignore the delusion of any position being inherently superior."*

– Dread Emperor Benevolent

Two years at most: that was how long Amadeus had to live.

Maybe only a year, if he blundered badly enough. He'd walked away from his meeting with the Tyrant of Helike knowing this, and was still exploring the implications. When no pattern of three had formed with the White Knight after their confrontation in Delos, Black had found several implications. The first was that the scope of that hero's story was narrower than he'd thought: it extended only to the civil war in the Free Cities, and as an

outsider to that narrative Amadeus did not have the *weight* required to qualify as a rival. That possibility had been a factor in why he'd cautiously called a retreat even though the Calamities had, arguably, been winning. If they were mere side-characters in that conflict, the most likely pattern for them was to be victorious early then brutally crushed after the heroes improved their power. A whetting stone for the blades of the Gods Above, essentially. By removing himself early he would not have allowed the pattern to truly form. And yet, the premise was flawed.

The White Knight, Scribe had informed him, was not of the Free Cities. He was Ashuran, somewhat surprising given his dark skin. A little digging had allowed his spymistress to find out the man's mother had been a Soninke exile, eventually executed because of one of the labyrinthine laws that governed the citizenship tiers of the Thalassocracy. The White Knight's reason to be involved, then was not 'right of birth'. The two sisters that were part of his heroic band were themselves from the Free Cities, but neither the House of Light the Ashen Priestess had served in nor the hidden covenant of wizards her sister had studied under had been harmed by either Praesi forces or those of the Tyrant. 'Personal connection' wasn't the reason either, then. Amadeus had made sure that both those places of origin would remain untouched for the duration of the war: heroes with butchered families, adopted or otherwise, became infinitely more dangerous.

The only motive that fit was 'ethical opposition', but if that was the case Amadeus should have ended up the rival to the other Knight. He represented a larger and more active power than the Tyrant of Helike, arguably with a deeper historical connection with Evil. Unless, of course, some deeper unknown connection existed between the White Knight and the Tyrant. That theory had been buried during his conference with the vicious child from Helike: the other villain was not bound by a pattern of any sort.

Amadeus did not consider his own intellect to be superior, in the larger scheme of things. He'd been at the side of Wekesa for decades and early understood that Warlock was perhaps the most brilliant mind to grace Praes in ten generations, however narrow his interests. Only Alaya stood in the same league, a mastermind who'd been able to fill the function of two Named for over forty years with sheer cunning and ruthlessness while facing men and women who were bloody ambitions made flesh. He was not the strongest, either. In matters of brute force, Sabah could snap him in half in the span of a single breath when it came to martial might Hye stood unequalled under the sky. Black wasn't even the best at killing: Assassin's body count dwarfed his, for both Named and mortals, and had been collected without ever taking a single wound. As for Scribe, the way she'd effectively become the bureaucracy and spy network of an entire kingdom

without ever having a permanent office was far beyond his capacity. Amadeus' only noteworthy talent, in his opinion, was clarity of sight. The ability to look at a situation if not without biases then with fewer of them than anyone else doing the same.

That same clarity was how he'd understood why he was not currently in a pattern of three. The White Knight was, in fact, supposed to face a Black Knight as a rival. That individual was simply not him.

Midnight bell was nearing, the villain thought as he glanced up at the starry sky. Wekesa was already asleep inside the gaudy tent he'd taken out of his pocket dimension along with most of their supplies. There would be no waking him until dawn. Sabah was napping at his side, buried in blankets up to her neck like some sort of gargantuan cocoon. Sitting on a log, Amadeus stirred the fire ahead of him with the long stick he'd carved out earlier and shaped a plan. Planning with two years in mind, he now had to destroy or neuter every major threat to the Empire before Catherine became the Black Knight. He would make a second series of schemes in the days to come with the notion of him surviving only a year in mind, but first he needed to establish what the optimal results could be. He'd once thought he had a decade left in him still and planned to have his apprentice ready to replace him in half that but the timetable would have to be adjusted. There were four fronts he would have to settle: Callow, Praes, the Free Cities and Procer. In the back of his mind gears of iron turned as his eyes remained on the dancing flames.

Callow and Praes, as it currently stood, were intertwined issues. The former kingdom was, last he'd heard, under attack by several forces. The Courts of Arcadia, the rebel forces of the Diabolist and a potential Deoraithe uprising. Alaya already had plans in the works for the Diabolist, but that was no longer enough. She had to be dead within the next six months, with minimal casualties. This much he could rely on Catherine to accomplish, and solidify her grip on Callow in the process. The Courts had been an unexpected set of pieces in this game. Amadeus had three standing operational plans for the Legions to turn back a fae incursion depending on where they crossed, but none were designed to handle a full-fledged invasion. Winter had been temporarily handled by his apprentice, but that was mitigating the symptoms instead of the root cause. It was necessary to find out *what* had driven both Courts to leave Arcadia and permanently destroy that incitement. For now, Amadeus lacked the information needed to make a decision. Scribe would need a few months still to find out what he wanted, so he'd have to trust Catherine to hold them at bay until then.

She should be able to, and that calibre of opponent would quicken her growth. Dealing with creatures whose power was massively

larger than her own would prepare her for the fights with heroes she would be facing as the Black Knight. The nature of fae being so closely associated with patterns would also sharpen her eye in this regard, enough she would not be caught on the wrong side of a narrative easily. The dark-haired man had originally meant to train that aspect of her against the High Lords through the controlled battleground of rule over Callow, but in this case the substitute was superior to the original. The Deoraithe were a thornier issue, especially since he still did not know what had driven them to act. Alaya and he had originally allowed the Duchy of Daoine to remain untouched after the Conquest because it served as an ideal border state against the Golden Bloom, both because of the Deoraithe's rabid hatred for the elves and their limited avenues for growth. While powerful, by themselves they would never be powerful enough to be a true threat to the Empire – and their culture essentially ensured they would never seek foreign allies.

Now, though, it had been proved they could be made to move. Unless the motive for their deployment was unique and incapable of being reproduced, the odds of which were low, then it was possible for Daoine to be leveraged into action again. That made them a liability, the kind that could not be allowed to exist with a crusade on the horizon. By the end of the current unrest, Daoine would have to be either bound to Catherine definitively in her capacity as ruler of Callow or broken beyond capacity to act. If it was the second case, the best time to act would be after they'd fought battles in the south: wiping out the Watch in their own territory would be extremely costly. *Destroying the army and culling the population of breeding age by four tenths should be enough.* Amadeus disliked leaving a wounded enemy still breathing, but logistics dictated exterminating the entire Duchy would require too many resources and take too long. He'd send word to Grem and Ranker to assess the situation and act accordingly, if he was unable to return in time to pass judgement.

That left the more complicated issue of the relationship between Callow and Praes, or more accurately the Dread Empress and the Squire. Catherine was about to seize direct power over her homeland, which was one of the outcomes he'd considered most probable. The moment the Ruling Council had been formed, there were only two ways it could go forward: either Squire would terrify the Praesi establishment into submission or she would wipe it out entirely and become de facto queen. Neither result displeased him, as the Ruling Council had always been meant to be a crutch that would allow his apprentice to learn to rule. Given how long Amadeus had left to live, such a slow-paced process was no longer feasible: Catherine discarding the crutch by herself accelerated the process by a few months. Alaya would be furious at the loss of control, he knew, but she would be aware that Catherine ruling Callow with the backing of the population was an

unmitigated victory for the Empire. Squire breaking away entirely from Praes was, after all, impossible.

That was the truth under the surface current, and why he'd never once felt threatened by his apprentice gathering an independent power base. Catherine was, after all, a villain. The Principate would not consider Callow ruled by villainous queen any more acceptable than it being an imperial possession. Strife between Praes and her kingdom reborn would only weaken her in the face of Proceran advances: as long as Catherine Foundling held power in Callow, she needed the Empire to survive. Amadeus had taken more stringent measures as well, of course. Though Callowan soldiers had been part of the Fifteenth since its foundation, he'd made sure to give her mostly criminals in the initial batch. That meant that all her closest collaborators were Praesi: her general and all the senior staff were from the Wasteland. Though being in close proximity to a charismatic Named for several years ensured their strongest loyalty would be to her, their ties to the Empire made them into counter-weights against thoughts of breaking away entirely.

Much like him, personal loyalty mattered a great deal to his apprentice. As long as declaring independence antagonized all the people closest to her, Catherine would seek a middle ground instead. Since a boundary had been set in that direction, the other boundary had to be established on the Praesi side. Alaya should already be working on a way to bind Squire to her, and would be well aware that coercion would result in permanent enmity. He did not have to bother himself with this part of the equation. Instead, what he would have to turn his eyes to was the stability of the Wasteland. Alaya's magnificent decades-long plan had finally come to fruition and destroyed the Truebloods in full. Three legions would scour Wolof clean as soon as a winner emerged from the succession struggle there, removing a nest of unrest in Praes for at least twenty years. It would not be enough. Every former Trueblood not currently aligned with these so-called 'Moderates' would have to be killed and their entire family line ripped out root and stem. Amadeus was not above borrowing the strength of Callow to accomplish this, if other legions balked at the slaughter. The Clans were loyal, and need not be touched, but he would need to have a frank conversation with the foremost Matrons and explain to them that if they made a single questionable move Wekesa would bring down the Grey Eyries on their heads. Ranker would back him in this, he knew. She'd long run out of patience with the more isolationist of the Matrons.

All of this would secure their back within a year, if handled properly, which left exterior threats. The Principate was the foremost among those. Cordelia Hasenbach had roped in both Levant and Ashur, which gave her utmost naval supremacy and a quiet southern border. When Procer came knocking, it would be with

everything but the northern garrisons. At least a fifty thousand professional soldiers, easily twice than in levies, and that was without counting any armies sent to reinforce by the Dominion. If most of the Legions were at the Red Flower Vales, it was possible to resist that strength as long as there was no unrest inside Imperial territories. That was not enough, he decided. If Procer retreated with enough of its force intact, the problem was only delayed by half a decade at most. The Principate had to be decisively beaten, its alliances sundered and the First Prince killed. She was, frankly speaking, too dangerous to leave alive. That meant campaigning inside Proceran borders in an offensive war, which would most likely lead to defeat given the current balance of forces.

It was time to start using harsh measures, then. Using the Calamities to destroy the capital of the Principate, for a start, should incapacitate its ruling infrastructure. Using a surprise strike to torch and poison the central principalities, the main farmlands of Procer, would lead to widespread starvation come winter. As for the Thalassocracy, if they could not be reasoned with Assassin would need to eliminate their entire two highest citizenship tiers. That would create chaos that could buy the Empire two years at least, and if Procer could be dealt with during that time the chances of Ashur resuming the war alone were low. The Dominion of Levant was too far and too decentralized to cripple in one stroke, but their ties to the alliance were also the weakest. They would not remain committed if victory did not look feasible. There were even harsher moves that could be made, of course – the Tower was still in contact with the ancient abomination that ruled the Kingdom of the Dead. But putting that devil back in that bottle after it was uncorked would be impossible, and in the long term more dangerous to imperial interests than the current Procer.

Amadeus had spent over fifty years carefully making sure not to burn too many bridges, to avoid the very kind of crusade the First Prince was assembling, but the hour of reckoning had come. The Principate needed to be so badly damaged it would not recover for a generation, if possible while leaving most of Levant's strength intact – the Dominion would not be able to resist the bait of a weakened south if its armies were still strong. Most importantly, Cordelia Hasenbach had to die. Even if another war of succession did not erupt, whoever replaced her would be part of one of the regional power blocs Alaya had made emerge. They would have powerful internal enemies to deal with, and given the nature of the Highest Assembly that meant a Principate divided in fact if not in name. All of this, though, would come next year. There was a more immediate problem at hand, the Free Cities.

The balance of power could not be allowed to swing in the favour of Good down here. At the very least, neutrality had to be forced with the Tyrant remaining in a strong position. The threat of

Helike armed to the teeth at her back would force Hasenbach to keep troops in the south to dissuade an attack. *Neutrality would be better than an outright victory for the Tyrant*, Amadeus thought. If the Tyrant won, Procer had an excuse to wage war in the region and secure it before turning to Praes. If the balance was restored, they had a knife at their back and no diplomatically acceptable excuse to remove it. If Procer started intervening in the affairs of foreign nations, its allies would protest. Hasenbach could not afford to lose them if she wanted a crusade in more than name. *And the moment the Tyrant is no longer a threat, the entire Free Cities will start viewing the troops she sent as an invasion force*. The desired outcome, then, was a truce in the Free Cities with a guarantee they would not participate in the larger conflict. How could Amadeus accomplish this?

Currently, Atalante was under occupation and Delos out of the war – the removal of the more combative elements of the Secretariat by Assassin had seen to that. The strife he'd begun in Penthes was keeping them busy, though they'd still managed to repulse an attack from the ramshackle army of Bellerophon. The slave armies of Stygia, headed by their Magisters, had joined Helike on the march to the last remaining active opposition in the war: Nicae. Which was filled with mercenaries, Proceran fantassins and its own decently skilled forces. Taking Named out of the story, after marked but not severe casualties Nicae should fall to enemy forces. With a band of heroes backing the city, though, the situation was different. It became 'the last stronghold, besieged by the hordes of Evil'. Defeat was virtually assured as long as this remained the narrative, and Amadeus did not currently have enough authority with Stygia and Helike to properly influence their decision-making. They would have to be bypassed entirely, then.

The lynchpin of this entire situation, as far as he could tell, was the White Knight. He was the Named keeping the band together. Without him they would either disperse or lose the coherency needed to be a true threat. If the White Knight was dead, Amadeus believed he could turn the victory of the Evil-aligned cities into a bloody draw that would weaken both sides enough they could be forced to negotiate a truce. The Tyrant would be trouble – he'd already begun disrupting Warlock's scrying, which had cut off the dark-haired man's conversation with his apprentice – but he was also fickle. As long as he was presented with a more enticing game than his current one, he could be brought to the table. All Amadeus had to worry about was surviving the boy's inevitable attempts to kill him during the battle for Nicae. Contingencies were already being put in place. The key to this entire situation, then, was eliminating the White Knight. The villain poked at the flames again.



It could be done, with the right preparations. The lack of pattern would not hinder this.

"You look like you're up to no good," Sabah said sleepily.

Amadeus smiled. It was an old joke, now more comfortable than funny.

"Did I wake you?" he asked. "I apologize."

"I sleep lighter than when we were started out," she said. "We're getting old, Amadeus."

The Black Knight chuckled, sliding down the log to sit next to her.

"You've still got a few decades in you," he said. "Enough you'll see your both your children get grey hair."

"Amna's raised them well," she said wistfully. "I think of them more often than I used to, out on adventures like this."

Both time she'd given birth she'd left his side for a year afterwards to mother the children, but inevitably Sabah had left Ater to join him – he'd spent most of his time in Callow, the last twenty years. Her husband had done most of the rearing, repeatedly refusing promotions in the Imperial bureaucracy to have enough time for it. Black rather liked the man, though how his old friend had come to fall in love with that diminutive, mild-mannered specimen had long been a subject of wonder.

"I think," he said, "that our time is drawing to an end."

The large Taghreb turned amused eyes to him.

"You're not usually this maudlin," she said. "We've handled worse than the Tyrant. He's like a crippled take on Heir, only with a sense of humour."

"He really was a pompous ass, wasn't he?" Black smiled.

"Catherine's rival is worse," Sabah grunted. "I'm looking forward to the kid hacking her in a few pieces."

"It will be a learning experience for her," Amadeus murmured. "Killing the Heir was a turning point for me."

"You were softer before," Sabah agreed softly. "We all were. I still remember what it felt like back then, looking at his corpse. Like there was a storm ahead."

She frowned.

"Feels the same now," she admitted. "Like we're reaching a pivot."

*I'm going to die soon*, he almost told her. But he couldn't, because if he did she would fight it. Even harder than Warlock would, because Warlock understood that some things were worth dying for. Captain didn't. She had no great cause, no febrile drive to understand the nature of Creation. Sabah only wanted them to live as long and happily as they could, and if she had to cave in other people's heads for that so be it. He'd always loved that about her, the purity of the sentiment. He'd never met another Named like her, so unconcerned with their own power. In that sense she was the strangest among them.

"Do you ever regret it?" he asked suddenly. "Coming with Wekesa and I, the morning after we first met you."

She looked at him, bemused.

"We've been at this over forty years, Sabah," he said. "We've killed so many people I can't remember all the faces. We won, when it mattered, but there were dark days too. Those just don't make it into the legends."

The massive Taghreb patted his shoulder gently.

"You're an idiot," she told him, not unkindly. "You two are family. You might as well ask me if I regret breathing. Besides, if I hadn't come along you twerps would have mouthed yourself off into an early grave."

She paused.

"And you and Hye would still be pretending you still didn't desperately want to bone," she added.

"Sabah," he protested.

"Oh, she's just teaching me swordsmanship," she mocked in a high-pitched voice. "Like that didn't turn into an excuse for you two to get sweaty and handsy before the first lesson was over."

"I learned a lot from her," Black said.

"I know," she said. "Tents don't block out noise very well."

As one of the foremost tacticians of the age, Amadeus recognized that this was not a battle he could win. Retreat was required. Besides, at least he'd never used an entire roasted pig as a courting gift, unlike some other people that would go nameless.

"I need you to do something for me," he said.

She raised a thick eyebrow.

"Eudokia tells me Procer is still sending grain and silver to Nicae by land convoys," he said.

The Tyrant, for reasons only known to him, was allowing them to pass untouched.

"We need to turn the screws on the city before it turns into a battle," he said. "The emptier their coffers and granaries, the better."

It would be easier to force them to negotiate if they were all but destitute.

"Been a while since I hunted on my own," Captain said, staring into the flame. "Might do me some good. The Beast gets wilful when I keep it on the leash for too long."

He nodded silently and left it at that. Eventually she drifted back into sleep, the two of them nestled close to the fire.

"Two years," he murmured. "It will be enough. I'll *make* it enough."

The Gods could help anyone who got in his way, if they so wished. It would make no difference.

## Heroic Interlude: Injunction

*"Forty-nine: if any wizard over the age of fifty suddenly becomes evasive when asked about your parents, you may safely assume yourself to be either royalty or related to your archenemy in some way."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

The interesting thing about morality, Hanno had found, was that it evolved across the years. Living through shards of a hundred heroes and heroines' lives had made it impossible to deny as much, though he disliked the thought that concepts like Good and Evil could be mutable. The Book of All Things, after all, did not change – neither should ethics. Yet, a few thousand years ago, most of Calernia had once practiced slavery. The ancestors of nations that now found the very notion repugnant had then been unable to function without it. Procerans, in days before there was a Procer, had raided each other for plunder and workers. The Titanomanchy had built its wonders as much by the legendary craftsmanship of the Gigantes as on the backs of a hundred thousand Arlesite slaves. Even Ashur, his homeland, had once kept a citizenship tier beneath them all where forced labourers and servants were inducted into. But over the years, that ugly reality had been... outgrown. Recognized as unworthy of all those who would call themselves the children of the Heavens.

And so slavery went from commodity to sin, and Creation was made a little brighter. There were, of course, holdouts. The drow of the Everdark still sent raiding parties to the surface to grab the unwary and spirit them below. The Kingdom of the Dead still farmed men like crops, growing them and reaping them in an even darker kind of sin to swell the ranks of its armies. In Mercantia people were sold like cattle to all those who had the coin and the inclination, the City of Bought and Sold concerned solely by the lustre of gold. But the city famous for it, the one that had perfected the art of chaining others centuries before the Miezans first glimpsed the shores of Calernia, had always been Stygia. Its slave phalanxes, the Spears of Stygia, were famous on the continent for unflinching obedience and having had fear scoured out of them by the concoctions and sorceries of the Magisters. The entire city was a den of iniquity every passing day in a way that made the worst excesses of Helike pale.

The White Knight watched the tall banner floating above the camp, gold and grey set with two pure white cranes. Redress and Retribution, they were called, the patron spirits of Stygia. Lesser gods that had settled in the heart of the city when it was first built – he knew this for a fact for he'd watched one of them millennia ago centuries ago. *Golden beak dipped in blood, eyes older than her entire bloodline red with hatred that was utterly inhuman. It would not matter. She was the Sword of the Free: she would wrest her people from chains and lead them to found a city in the east. A land where no would ever rule over them again. She rose, wounded but unbowed, and fought again.* Hanno blinked, chasing away the memories not his own. Over two months since he'd fought the Black Knight and still sometimes the other lives trickled through into him. He'd come very close to dying, that day. That had consequences.

"Money for thinking," the Champion said.

"Copper for your thoughts," Hedge corrected in a low voice.

"Copper is money," the Levantine replied condescendingly. "Witch wrong again. Do you no get tired of it?"

"Let's move," Hanno said, interrupting before the bickering could start in earnest. "Follow the plan."

He saw the Hedge Wizard open her mouth from the corner of her eye, but her sister thumped her with her staff. Priestess was, he had to admit, the most reliable of his companions in temperament. Though considering her competition was a drunken disappearing Bard, her actively argumentative sister and brawler who kept trophies of her kills, that might not be saying much. Still, he knew from the Chamber of Borrowed Lives that no Named who lived longer than a few years managed to avoid growing some... quirks. The power conferred onto them by the Gods shaped them as much as they shaped it. Regardless he got along with her the best. More

than once they'd found themselves sharing a comfortable quiet in the back while the rest of their band bickered aimlessly. The four heroes crept across the grassy field, Hedge's spell keeping them hidden from the moonlight even as they neared the outskirts of the Stygian camp. A palisade of wooden stakes had been raised and spear-slaves patrolled behind them. He could hear them pass by, when he pressed his ear against the wood.

"Priestess," he said.

The dark-haired woman nodded. The tip of her staff traced a circle on the surface of the palisade and a heartbeat later the wood crumbled into ash. They passed through, one after another. Hanno glanced at Champion and Hedge through the slit of his barbute.

"Half an hour," he reminded them. "That's all we'll need. Retreat afterwards."

"Will make river of blood," Champion said enthusiastically from under her badger-shaped helm. "Eat hearts of enemies."

"That's cannibalism," Hedge said.

"Not so," the Levantine said. "Says in Book. Allowed if they wicked."

"The Book of All Things does not excuse eating people," the Wizard firmly stated.

"Maybe in lame Free Cities version," Champion replied sceptically.

They both turned to the Ashen Priestess, the only individual among them with an actual religious education. The heroine stared back with hickory-coloured eyes.

"I'm not humouring this with an actual response," she informed them flatly. "Get moving before I decide to make the two of you incontinent."

"Mighty Priest-Witch true monster," the Champion said admiringly before fleeing.

Hedge met her sister's eyes for a moment longer before making a tactical withdrawal, paling a bit.

"Can you?" Hanno asked, morbidly curious.

He had a trick to discern lies – it was common, for those sworn to the Choir of Judgement – but using it drew on his Name and he still had a fight ahead of him.

"I fed Alkmene an herbal concoction when were we twelve to make her believe I could," Priestess admitted, the sly shadow of a smile on her lips.

Hanno would have snorted if the situation was any less serious. They fell into step together naturally, his longer stride shortening to accommodate her own. There'd been no need to rely on his few memories of fighting Stygia in the past to deduce where the Magisters would be camped: while the entire rim of the fortified camp was rough burlap tents, the centre was absurdly luxurious and bustling with servants during the day. Without Hedge to guide them around the wards and keep them out of sight, the two of them had to be careful. The White Knight could feel sorcery, if he attuned himself, and Ash could outright see it – but neither of them were trained in picking up on the subtler effects, much less bypass them. They sidestepped an alarm ward early on, but found to their displeasure that deeper in there was another ward that circled entirely around the circumference of the camp. The Priestess could dismantle it, of course, but that would be giving away their presence. They hid in the shadows for a while instead, waiting for their distraction to arrive, and were eventually rewarded by a spray of fireworks that set fire to a dozen tents in the distance followed by a booming voice challenging the entire camp to single combat. Slaves soldiers immediately began to mobilize, and only then did the two heroes cross the alarm ward. Stealth was no longer the game, now. Swiftmess was the line of life and death.

The first Magister they found was obviously drunk, a grey-haired woman leaning against a post and breathing like someone trying not to throw up. Lean face, eyes dulled by liquor and long dark robes whose sleeves tangled with the many rings on her fingers. All Magisters were mages, and only gained the title by showing power and ruthlessness. Neither of those things mattered, when the mage could not see you coming. The White Knight's sword took her in the throat without warning, hacking straight through. A cry of surprise came from ahead, the corpse dropped and the battle began.

Green sorcery lashed out in a stream at him, but Hanno ducked to the side and broke into a run. A Spear of Stygia burst out of a tent to the side, but in a flash turned into a pile of ashes. The Magisters were aware they were under attack, now. Within moments at least a dozen more mages stormed out of the large silken pavilion in the centre of the camp, the rings on their hands glinting as they immediately began spellcasting. The Wandering Bard had told him there were fifteen in total, sent by Stygia to lead its army against Nicae. Decapitating the head of the snake was why he'd taken come with his companions tonight. A slave army without masters was as good as paralyzed, and might actually retreat back to Stygia. The more casters joined the fray, the closer to him the spells came: they stood in a tight cluster, and

for all that they were wretched souls one and all he almost admired the skill being shown. Spells led into each other, herding him into harsher attacks like a horse being led to water. The Light flooded his veins, sharpening his reflexes far beyond limits as he began to weave and duck through the volleys directed at him, not even a full step ahead. Another slave tried to spear him through the side, only to be caught by the edge of a black orb that saw the man's skin contract and tear under the sudden pressure. The Magisters did not care who else died in their attempt to put him down. He'd expected nothing less from slavers.

"**Ride,**" the White Knight said.

Light wove itself into a horse in the blink of an eye and even as Hanno deftly leapt onto its back he felt a lance of light form in his hand.

"Aspect," one of the Magisters noted, tone calm.

"Suppression," another ordered.

Fourteen jets of black light bloomed, emanating from outstretched hands, and combined their streams at him. Hanno struck at the malevolent power with his lance, but after a few heartbeats his weapon broke into shards and the power of the Magisters tore through his mount as well – the White Knight grit his teeth to ignore the pain of the feedback from having an aspect overpowered. He fell kneeling to the ground, unsheathing his sword again.

"Full attack, before he uses a second," a woman's voice stated.

Before the White Knight could react, three stakes of obsidian nailed both his feet to the ground, going through his armour like it was butter. The twelve remaining Magisters finished their incantations a moment later, fire reeking of sulphur blooming in their hands.

"We are Magisters of Stygia, boy," the woman who'd just spoken, a cold smile on her face. "Even heroes kneel before us."

The twelve spheres of hellfire hit him in the chest almost simultaneously. Hanno unhesitatingly flared the Light under his skin where the impact was happening – though that was enough to spare his flesh, their spells melted straight through his plate and threw him into a tent like a rag doll. If he'd not used his Name, there would be a smoking hole where his ribcage currently stood. With a grunt, he rose to his feet and tried to get the silk panels off his head before he could get hit again. No doubt the slaver mages were feeling rather smug at the moment, certain of their superiority. They'd been batting him around since the beginning, after all. That was their mistake. They'd used their

strength on the one who, of the two present, could take a beating. All the while ignoring the other.

"Though their horses and chariots are like a river unto Creation, though their spears be forest and their sword be mountains, the Gods pass judgement unto them. Do not dread, for I bear the word of the Heavens and that word is **begone**."

The Ashen Priestess' voice rang loud and clear like a trumpet across the chaotic camp. Finally rid of the silk, Hanno was just in time to see the circle of blinding light form around the standing Magisters. Panic flickered across their faces for a single moment, and then the miracle wiped away the world. Even his Name wasn't enough to keep the ringing out of his ears, or prevent the blindness that burned his retinas. Ten heartbeats later, when the terrible whiteness finally left his eyes, all the White Knight saw where the Magisters had once stood was a faint shimmer of light. Of the men and women, there was not a trace. Ash was panting, leaning on her staff: this was one of the more strenuous miracles she could call on, and one that took long to prepare. Against the likes of the Calamities, attempting to use it would be a death sentence. But these had been a different breed they were facing. Men and women ready to lean into their arrogance. And for all that the miracle took long to bring forth, there was no denying the effectiveness of the harsh judgement of the Heavens meted out. The White Knight limped to his friend and allowed her to lean on his shoulder: they needed to get moving soon, but they had a few moments still. There was a flicker of movement behind them and Hanno's fingers tightened around the grip of his sword, but it was only a bird. A pigeon, to be exact, and it landed on his shoulder.

"Well, the distraction worked," Hedge said, her voice unnaturally coming out of the bird's mouth. "Maybe a little too well."

A sound like a dozen cauldrons rolling down a street resounded behind them, which from experience he knew meant the Champion was running. The Levantine came into sight not long afterwards, her breastplate splattered in so much blood she might as well have dipped it in a barrel of the stuff. The White Knight frowned when he saw no one was in pursuit. Even with the Magisters dead the slave soldiers should be continuing the fight. Why was no one following?

"Funny cripple here," the Champion announced delightedly. "Giving speech. We beat him like renting mule, yes?"

"The Tyrant?" the White Knight said.

Why was he – *oh*. The hero closed his eyes.

"He's taking over the Stygian army," Hanno said.



"Can he even *do* that?" the pigeon complained, too close to his hear for comfort.

"Masterless slaves and a ruler Name? It's basically handed to him," the Wandering Bard announced cheerfully.

All their eyes flicked to their wayward fifth member, who was leaning against a wooden pole with a flask in hand. Said hand, apparently sweaty, slipped and she nearly hit the side of her head against her support before gamely trying to pretend she'd always meant to do that. Hedge snorted, which was impressive considering she was a bird at the moment.

"Where were you, Aoede?" Ash asked.

"Seeing a guy about a thing," the Bard replied vaguely.

"You are the world's most terrible riddler," the pigeon stated. "There's no mystery, only non-answers and a blatant drinking problem."

"The point of this was to remove Stygia from the equation," the White Knight said, ignoring the byplay. "We've failed."

"But you successfully hit another point by accident, so it's all good really," the Bard told them with a smile.

Hanno frowned.

"And what would that point be?"

"Taking a tool out of the other monster's toolbox," Aoede said, toasting her flask. "That said, my lovelies, now might be a great time to leg it. You're about to have a very motivated army looking for you."

The hero glanced at Priestess, who shrugged in resigned agreement.

"Retreat, then," the White Knight said, feeling somewhat robbed of a victory.

Even as they began their flight, Hanno saw the Bard slipping an arm around Champion's armoured shoulders and leaning close.

"Do you happen to like monster stories, Rafaella?" she asked.

"Speak me more," the Levantine grinned.

## **Chapter 24: Vanguard**

*"My dear Chancellor, I didn't murder my entire family and use their blood to turn myself into an undead abomination to be told*

*I couldn't do things."*

– Dread Emperor Revenant

We'd wasted another sennight at Denier, to my displeasure. In part haggling terms with Duchess Kegan, who must clearly have been a fishwife in a past life, and in part because we were waiting on the Twelfth Legion to finish its march towards us. Those four thousand men were still led by General Afolabi, who I'd met once before when the Lone Swordsman was making trouble in the city the Twelfth garrisoned. I'd been unimpressed by his inability to handle the mounting tensions in Summerholm, he'd been unimpressed by the fact I'd launched an ambush on a hero in his own backyard without warning him. Neither of us were particularly pleased to see the other, but if I had to traipse through Arcadia I'd rather do it with thirty thousand men than twenty-six thousand. Besides, I rarely had to deal with him directly: he was under Marshal Ranker's command and his legionaries stuck to their own camp. It took us another three days to ferry the Deoraithe army across the river with fishing boats and barges, the mounting delays driving me up the wall.

The longer we tarried here the longer Diabolist had to set up her end game. I was anybody's guess how long we'd be in Arcadia, and more importantly where the gate out would be. After all, I didn't control that part. Masego had given me a very complicated explanation on the subject involving alignments, symmetry and what had struck me as a bit of religion no matter how much mathematics he brought into the mix. My own understanding was a bit simpler: my will was a needle. By opening a gate I was punching through the fabric that was between worlds into Arcadia, but where the needle had to punch through to get me *out* of Arcadia was determined by where I'd come from and where I wanted to go. No doubt there were sundry metaphysical implications to all of this, but if I wanted to be babbled incomprehensively at I could just buy people drinks. Hells, considering I'd basically taken control of the treasury for Callow I could actually afford that these days. Progress.

Our supply situation had been another headache, and I'd never missed Ratface more than when Ranker sent a copy of our stores for the campaign to my desk. The Marshal and General Afolabi had essentially emptied Denier and Summerholm's granaries to ensure they could operate alone for a few months, but there was a major difference between driving those supply carts down Callowan roads and through the wilderness of Arcadia. Getting the matter sorted took another two days, then another two when Duchess Kegan insisted on bringing he own carts across the river instead of relying on Legion ones. My officers learned to enjoy their wine cold, because the temperature in the room when I heard about that descended *sharply*. There'd been talk from the Deoraithe of keeping a different supply train instead of keeping all the

rations together, but after I glared the meeting table frozen they'd 'magnanimously' declined to further pursue the matter.

And now here we were, over a fortnight after when I'd wanted us to leave, assembling the allied armies in the darkness before dawn. The largest gate I could open was an equilateral triangle seventy feet at the base, so there was no possibility of going through in ranks. It would have to be a marching column, which had prompted another round of what I refused to even call bickering. I knew bickering, it was the true tongue of all my closest friends. There was fondness in bickering, a give and take. This was just an ugly brew of distrust and spite spilling over what should have been an exceedingly straightforward manner. Marshal Ranker had wanted her two legions to go through first, and General Afolabi had backed the notion. Duchess Kegan had suggested her own infantry be the first to cross, heavily implying the goblin couldn't be trusted not to set up an ambush for her army on the other side. Ranker had then wondered out loud if there'd been enough left of the body of Kegan's younger brother to identify him after Grem One-Eye killed him at the Wall, during the Conquest. Before that could get any uglier, I'd slammed my fist on the table.

It had promptly broken, because these days I was pretty sure I could punch through iron if I put my mind to it. That wasn't worrying in the slightest.

Anyhow, that had gotten their attention. I'd told them that it was *my* fucking gate so my people were going through first, led by myself, after which Ranker's Fourth would follow. The Deoraithe would go through next, and General Afolabi's legion would be in charge of the rearguard and covering our supply train. Tactically speaking this entire disposition was shit and nobody liked the compromise, but apparently breaking furniture made people less prone to arguing with you on minor details. Robber had since informed me that rumours went around the camps about my temper, nowadays, but I doubted even Black would have been able to handle this level of futile squabbling with a smile. As for Juniper, well, she'd have sent them to cool their heels by digging holes and filling them at least twice by now. Gods, I missed the Fifteenth. The wretches gave me lip, sure, but at least they did whatever I asked them to without arguing for a quarter bell first. Still, here we finally were. The blood in my veins cooled and power wafted off my armour like smoke even as the gate shuddered open before me. I found myself panting when my mind finally returned to itself, leaning against the neck of my horse. I waited ten breaths for the tiredness to leave me before looking at the Gallowborne around me.

"Forward," I ordered.

We went through. Moving into Arcadia was a hard feeling to describe. It wasn't a pressure, not exactly. It was like being stripped away of a second skin you didn't know you had, leaving you feeling oddly naked even when wearing full plate like I was. I'd ridden ahead of my retinue so I had a moment to get my bearings before they caught up to me, breathing in the scene. It was night here too, but nothing alike. The fields south of Denier were cabbage and radish, mostly, while here it was long grass as far as the eye could see. A lazy breeze had the fields shivering while in the sky above us a full moon hung. I would have known we were in Summer even if I were blind, just from the irrational hatred I could feel welling up inside of me. The power I'd gained in Skade did not like being here at all, and the hatred sharpened when I glanced up at the moon. *Really?* I thought. *The moon?* My title was Duchess of Moonless Nights, so I saw the logic in it, but come on. *I've fought some pretty absurd things since I became a villain, but I draw the line at the godsdamned moon.*

I spurred Zombie the Second ahead as the Gallowborne came through behind me, immediately spreading out in formation and following behind me. In the distance, a few miles ahead, I could see tall and pale towers reaching for the sky. I frowned as I looked: the power I felt from that place was a mere shard of what Skade had felt like, so this was unlikely to be the seat of the Summer Court. But it was likely there'd be fae there, and the faint presence of the exit gate I could feel in the distance was beyond it. *Far* behind it. Shit. I'd had strong suspicions I'd have to fight my way through the third Arcadia voyage, but an expedition into the heart of Summer was beyond my worst expectations. Fighting the Summer Court in their own territory was not a recipe for success. *But what choice do I have?* We'd have to move quickly, before Summer could muster its entire army and strike at us. Force march directly to our way out, ignoring the fae as much as possible – getting drawn into a campaign out here would be consigning the thirty thousand soldiers I'd managed to assemble to the grave. It wasn't long before the entirety of the Gallowborne were behind me, and the moment the first of Nauk's legionaries set foot into Arcadia I began moving forward.

I wished Hakram was at my side, but I'd had to leave him back in Creation to make sure no idiocy would unfold between the 'allies' while my back was turned. The great tragedy of Adjutant was that I could only have one of him.

"Ma'am, are you certain we shouldn't wait for reinforcements?" Tribune Farrier asked quietly from my side.

"I need to be sure there's no army waiting to ambush us," I replied. "If we have to give battle when most our forces are stuck on the other side of that portal, I have no words for how fucked we are."

The dark-haired man nodded obediently, though he did not seem convinced. Since I was astride a horse I was the only one whose head was above the grass, and I allowed myself to luxuriate in the feeling of being the tallest person around for once as we moved towards the towers. My retinue moved warily in a square formation I was near the middle of, the greenery making the lines wobbly: this was not land made for marching. I could see no trace of any roads, and to my mixed relief and dismay no road conveniently appeared after I had that thought. When nearing a mile away from the gate, I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. No sign of anyone, but the grasslands made it hard to gauge that accurately. There could be ten thousand fae crouched down somewhere and none of us would notice until we stumbled over them. My instincts screamed trap, though in all fairness they almost always did. That healthy level of paranoia had kept me alive through a few years of being mortal enemies with Akua Sahelian, though, so I wasn't inclined to dismiss it out of hand.

"It's quiet," one of the soldiers behind me said.

"If any of you finishes that thought, I'm feeding them to Nauk," I said sharply.

I reined in Zombie and the entire formation slowed as I leant down to hide my profile, waiting for the hammer to fall. Nothing, huh? Nice try, but I wasn't falling for that again. I waited for another thirty heartbeats and sweet, sweet vindication came in the form of a volley of arrows taking flight from our left. A trickle of power touched my eyes and my sight sharpened, gauging the number of shafts. A hundred, maybe? Not many more than that. The Gallowborne reacted professionally, falling in the testudo formation mere moments before the projectiles finished their arc. If they'd been mere arrows, that would have mostly nixed any notion of inflicted casualties. Unfortunately, on the way down trails of fire bloomed behind the arrows and they hit the shields with streams of flame. I had no room to manoeuvre, stuck inside the formation as I was, and I wasn't going to risk an arrow-catch while fighting bloody fae. I threw myself off Zombie the Second moments before a pair of arrows hit his neck and flank, detonating with burst of red and yellow flame. My mount died instantly, and I swore filthily in Taghreb. Those *utter* bastards.

Did these pricks even understand how much a good warhorse cost? Some of us actually had to pay for things, not just play pretend with a fucking illusory economy. They'd damaged him enough I probably wouldn't even be able to raise him from the dead: I still needed mostly intact muscled to make a corpse move, necromancy or not. Only a handful of my retinue died to the first volley, though I saw that the arrows punched through steel shields and detonated afterwards to burn even when they couldn't kill. Rising to my feet, I unsheathed my sword and ripped my heater shield from Zombie's falling corpse. A second volley was

in the sky before we'd recovered from the surprise of the first and I winced in anticipation – I could see what they'd meant to do. First wave damaged the shields, second hit the unprotected soldiers. This was going to hurt. I hid my surprise when I saw the arrows fall in a half circle around us instead, though I grasped what they were actually doing the moment I saw the tall grass going up in flames. Sorcery drove the flames to complete the encirclement rather than burn aimlessly faster than I could say *I really hate fighting mages*. So they wanted us to stay penned up and die.

"GALLOWBORNE," I called out. "SHIELD WALL AND FOLLOW ME."

I strode to the wall of flames ahead, shield up, and let the frozen river of power that was my third aspect come to the fore. I wasn't using it – I'd not yet grasped it well enough for that – but just using the power was enough for my purposes. The fire stood three feet taller than me, but that hardly mattered: with a hiss I unleashed ice onto the flames, smothering them and carving a path ten men deep.

"Lion Devours Gazelle," a man's voice calmly stated ahead.

I charged through, the shield wall behind me, and saw silhouettes emerge from the grass even as a third volley flew at us. This one did not arc in the sky: it was shot straight forward, and though the impact was not as strong the bursting flames shot holes straight through my ranks. Pale blades like ivory were unsheathed in perfect silence as four dozen fae formed into two lines in front of me. The fae were tall and lovely, dark-haired and wearing a tabard marked with an oak over their silvery chain mail.

"Charge," I barked.

The longer before we closed in melee, the more they'd thin us out with arrows. The Gallowborne were but a step behind me as I ran, the sensation of over a hundred steel boots thumping the ground in unison sending a shiver down my spine. I felt hot breath against my neck, the Beast licking its chops hungrily. It was eager for blood, after the frustrations of the last month. Truth be told, so was I. The man ahead of me struck lightning-quick, fearless, but he was no Duke of Violent Squalls. Not even a deadwood soldier. I stepped around the blow and flicked my wrist, tearing through his neck between the helm and the mail. The face of the woman behind him was splashed with crimson but she did not flinch: she went for my neck without missing a beat. The flat of my blade touched hers, redirecting the blow, and my shield hit her in the stomach. She coughed blood and before she could react the pommel of my sword hit her in the eye – I felt the skull cave under it, but my boot stomped down on her throat and crushed it to be sure. In front of me, I saw nothing but grass. I turned and saw the same all along the line: my retinue's charge had been met

for a moment, then the fae had disengaged without even attempting a proper melee, melting into the greenery.

"Oh *shit*," I realized.

The fourth volley killed at least twenty of the Gallowborne. They'd fallen out of formation when trying to force the fae into close range fighting. Ahead of us four dozen fae formed into two ranks, pale swords in hand. We'd been at this for perhaps a quarter hour and already almost a third of my retinue was dead or wounded.

"Shield wall," I ordered.

Lion Devours Gazelle, the unseen commander had called it. *Piece by piece they eat us*. The fae had perfectly grasped the weakness of my force, compared to his. We had few crossbows – a mere three lines – and no good line of sight to use it. Range was theirs, and the moment my crossbowmen revealed themselves they'd be eating a volley. Trying to get up close would just result in the same thing every time: a quick and fruitless melee followed by the Summer fae disengaging just before the archers fired. *Bleeding us one skirmish at a time, taking us on a merry chase until all that's left is a trail of corpses*. By the size of the last volley and the number of swordsmen who'd faced us, I'd guess they weren't more than a hundred. We'd had double their numbers in hardened veterans when the steel came out, led by a Named. Another quarter hour of this and our numbers would be even. Another quarter hour after that and they'd outnumber us. There was nothing I could do about it save attempting to charge them by myself, and they'd just spread out to shoot at me from every direction while a handful of swordsmen kept me pinned.

"They beat us," I said, the words leaving a sour taste in my mouth.

Farrier was to my side, cheek burned red and an arrow wound on his shoulder, and I saw surprise flicker on his face.

"Countess," he said, "we can still–"

"The longer we're at this, the more soldiers we lose," I cut through. "Call the retreat."

I hadn't noticed in the heat of the fight, but they'd been drawing us further out. Towards the towers in the distance. *A hundred is about the size for a heavy patrol. I'm not liking the odds there isn't an army waiting for us there, even if it's not a large one*. If we went any further and they had reinforcements coming, we were as good as dead. They'd fire at us while we retreated and we'd take losses from that, but if I got stubborn here I was risking a wipe-out. I'd lost fights before. Been outmanoeuvred by Juniper, been beaten by Black's superior skills

or crushed by Captain's overwhelming might. But never before had I been so harshly outclassed when it came to tactics, and I did not like the feeling one bit. So this was Summer. The season of war, I'd heard it called. I'd seen nothing like the people I was facing now in Winter, and the thought had me uneasy. These weren't warriors they were soldiers and soldiers fine enough to be the match of the Legions. *We can't linger in Summer*, I thought. *We'll lose the entire army if we misstep even once*. Farrier had barked hard enough that my men were already retreating in a semblance of good order, and I saw some of them were picking up the corpses of their comrades.

"Leave the bodies behind," I ordered, tone bitter.

"Countess, you can't possibly mean that," a lieutenant said, tone aghast.

"We can't afford to be slowed down," I said.

I watched the silhouetted of the fae in the distance, their swordsmen already dispersing into the tall grass. Getting ready for another volley already.

"We'll be back for them," I said, clenching my fist.

There wasn't much I could do right now, but there was one thing left. I reached for the power of Winter inside me, grasped as much as I could and poured it into my sword until the metal frosted. I kept taking more and more, until I felt my blood go from cold to freezing. Any further than that and it would turn to thick red slurry inside my veins. Gritting my teeth, I swung the blade ahead of me. Ice sprouted into wall ten feet high along the arc of the swing, even as exhaustion flooded me. I'd used too much tonight already and now my armour felt like an anvil on my back.

"Hurry," I said, raising my voice. "It won't slow them down for long."

By the time the fae ceased pursuit, there were barely a hundred members of the Galloworne left.

There would be a reckoning for this.

## Chapter 25: Intent

*"Trust the Heavens but tie your horse."*  
– Callowan proverb

It was past dawn when the last soldier crossed the gate.

As soon as Robber stepped foot in Arcadia I had him prepare his cohort for scouting, but held off on sending him until Marshal



Ranker's legion was through. A few quiet sentences with her and moments later a thousand goblins melted into the countryside, with warnings about fae patrols and the kind of tactics they'd deployed so far. I had a pavilion mounted for me half a mile away from the gate, surrounded by Nauk's two thousand, and settled on a folding chair while my few mages tended to the injuries of the surviving members of my retinue. I could have gone to sleep, but I still was too angry to rest and unwilling to miss anything. Instead I sat chewing on my mistake with a wineskin in hand as the reports began filtering in. There was not a soul within a mile of the gate, the scouts said. Neither was there any sign of the bodies I'd left behind, and even the places I'd skirmished at were now pristine: no sign of fire or fighting. Half a bell later one of Ranker's officers reported her line had found a road to the west that looked like it was leading to the towers in the distance.

When the sun finally rose over the horizon, it found me still in the pavilion. There'd been one last development, not too long ago: Robber's cohort had caught a fae close to the road, when confirming it led to the towers. Said towers, the report also elaborated, were actually a fortress. One whose walls were now manned. They knew we were coming. I sent word to the Marshal and the Duchess to join me the moment the hamstrung fairy was brought into camp, Hakram hovering behind me. He felt guilty about not having been with me when I'd run into trouble, as if I hadn't been the one to order him to say in Creation to supervise.

"Would have made no difference if you were there," I said.

"You don't know that," he gravelled.

"It... this wasn't about power, Hakram," I said. "I alone would have been able to cut down a third of them, if they'd fought the way I wanted them to. The Gallowborne would have wiped them out if it had been a melee. They've killed harder things than lesser fae. We fought them badly – *I* fought them badly, and I lost."

"You did as well as you could," he said.

"They're not invincible," I told him, irritated at the attempt at comfort. "They picked their ground, their time and the lay of the engagement. We just need to start thinking of them as a proper army instead of just a troupe of fairies, because they're sure as Hells *fighting* like one."

"Well said," Duchess Kegan stated, her approval a tad condescending.

The ruler of the Deoraithe was not growing on me, it had to be said. I wanted to like her, I really did, but she was like the human version of a stone in your boot. Ranker brushed past her rudely, to the highborn's irritation, and I was careful not to

show amusement. I'd gotten this far by pretending to be above the bickering, taking sides would be surrendering what little advantage I had.

"Your boy caught one of them, then," the Marshal said, gingerly climbing atop a folding chair and helping herself to my wine.

She sniffed at the nozzle, hairless brow rising.

"Vale summer wine? Fancy."

She drank anyway, not that it would do much for her. Goblins were better a processing liquor and poison than either orcs or humans.

"Robber's good at finding things," I said, letting my voice carry enough that said Special Tribune would hear it from behind the pavilion flap where he was currently lurking.

"Stabbing them too," my murderous minion contributed with a grin as two other legionaries from his cohort dragged a fae heavily bruised and missing an arm.

Male, this one. More lightly armoured than the ones I'd run into, but his leather armour bore the same symbol I'd seen on the tabard of the patrol: a green oak. His remaining hand and feet were bound tightly, leaving him unable to do anything but kneel at an uncomfortable angle.

"I won't need you for the interrogation," I told Robber.

The goblin pouted, which on his face looked positively horrifying. Like a fish trying the same, but with needle-like teeth peeking through.

"Can I watch at least?" he wheedled.

"Scram," I said, and he read the mood correctly.

He swaggered away without pushing it, arms around the shoulders of his two cohorts, and I refrained from sighing at the sight. There were witnesses. The fae was gagged, so I rose to my feet to force down the cloth.

"Whose lands are we in?" I asked.

The soldier spat on my boot.

"Not the answer I was looking for," I said.

"Call back the boy," Ranker shrugged. "And send for knives."

"Torture will take time," the Duchess frowned.

"Better to move delayed than move blind," the Marshal said.

Hakram cleared his throat, drawing their attention. I glanced at him.

"You forget you have a Named leading you," the orc said.

Ah. Well, I'd never used it on fae before but considering how they were bound to stories it might actually work better than on mortals.

**"Answer my questions,"** I Spoke.

He twitched, fighting against the order, but eventually stilled.

"Whose lands are we in?" I repeated.

"The Count of Olden Oak," the fae said.

"How many soldiers do you have?" Duchess Kegan asked.

The fae smiled sardonically and said nothing. Ah, the wording. I asked him the question as Ranker sent the tan woman a mocking look.

"Two thousand," he said through gritted teeth.

"Any other nobles here?" I asked.

"The Baron of Dawning Day."

I frowned. That was two titled fae, which struck me as too many for the middle of nowhere. Weren't most of the nobles out with the army of Summer?

"Ask him where in Arcadia we are," Ranker said, thoughts going along the same line.

"The border marches," the fae replied when I did.

The two older women exchanged looks.

"If we march a sennight to the north, what will we find?" I asked.

That was, after all, about where I felt I'd be able to make a gate out. *Let it not be the city of Summer, let it not be –*

"The lands of the Princess of High Noon."

I needed to start being more careful about what I wished for, I decided. I glanced at the other commanders of the army, silently asking if they had any other questions. Neither did. I shot Hakram a look, and without any need for words he stepped forward and casually snapped the prisoner's neck.

"Be a dear and drag that outside, would you?" I said.

He snorted in amusement, but obeyed.

"So we need to march deeper into Summer," Ranker said, sharp eyes on me.

"And quickly," I grunted. "They'll consider this an invasion, there's a good chance they'll recall their armies from Creation to drive us out."

"Then the fortress had to be taken," Duchess Kegan said. "We can't leave two thousand soldiers at our back, not with the amount of supplies we carry."

"Agreed," I said. "Reports said it was a castle, curtain walls at least forty feet high. Legion standard?"

The last two words were spoken looking at the Marshal, who nodded pensively.

"Mages around the siege weapons, to ward from their magics," she added. "Securing replacements out here would be difficult."

"We've no notion of how long it would take to break down fae walls with mortal trebuchets," Duchess Kegan said disapprovingly.

"I understand time is an issue, Duchess," I said impatiently, "but I'm the only one here who's tangled with them. We rush those walls and we'll lose thousands, likely to no gain."

"If you use legionaries, yes," she said. "The Watch will take the walls and open the gates. Be ready to invest the fortress and deal with the nobles."

I raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't bring any ladders," I pointed out. "Or any siege fixtures at all, for that matter."

She smiled thinly.

"There will be no need for them," she said.

I glanced at Ranker, who chuckled.

"At worst there's fewer Deoraithe in existence," she said, tone making it clear she believed this to be no great loss.

I eventually nodded. If nothing else, I'd get to have a look at why so much fuss was always made about the Watch.

"We march, then," I said.

—

Nauk's two thousand took point. There screens of goblins to the side in case any surprises had been laid out for us, but our advance went unchallenged until we came in sight of the fortress. It was an impressive piece of work, compared to a mortal castle, but compared to the likes of Skade it was rather mundane. Pale walls encircled four towers, whose only hint of sorcery was the way they were intertwined in a way that evoked roots. Glittering soldiers in the same silvery chain mail and tabard as the patrol stood atop the rampart, armed with bows and swords. There weren't two thousand up there, by my estimation – maybe half that – which meant they'd kept reserves. The large oaken gate opened when Nauk's legionaries ceased marching well out of bow range, a single mounted man riding out even as I frowned. Behind me the allied army spread, the Deoraithe host right behind while the two legions took the wings. I didn't even need to focus to feel the power wafting from the rider, or notice it wasn't in the league of the Winter counts I'd encountered. The baron the prisoner had mentioned? Hakram at my side, we watched the fae caracole atop his white steed and raise his lance in a mocking salute.

"You have entered the lands of Summer Eternal, invaders," he called out. "Only death awaits you here."

I heard someone striding towards me, Nauk's legionaries parting for them. I wouldn't be taking the Gallowborne with me today, not after the losses they'd incurred. Farrier had protested but his own shoulder was only held together by mage healing, and if it got broken again within a fortnight he'd be crippled for life.

"A champion," Duchess Kegan said, occupying the side of me Adjutant didn't. "How quaint."

I'd read enough about Deoraithe to know what they thought about this kind of posturing in matters of war. I didn't answer, waiting for the armies to reach their assigned positions as the fae continued yelling.

"Are all of you cowards?" the rider called out. "Will not a single of you meet this Baron of Dawning Day on the field to redeem your honour?"

"He's in crossbow range," Adjutant said. "Shall we give him a princely answer?"

I chewed over that.

"I don't trust our shots to put him down," I finally said.

"I have the finest bowmen in Calernia under my command," the Duchess said.

"Better to kill him now, so he's not on the walls to make trouble for your people," I said. "Hakram. Can you do it?"

The orc looked at the baron for a long moment.

"Shouldn't be too much trouble," he said.

"Then shut the bastard up," I ordered.

He laughed, clapping my shoulder before striding away. I felt the Duchess' gaze on me.

"A princely answer," she repeated. "Is it true, then. You had the Exiled Prince shot instead of duelling him."

"If I personally killed everyone in my way I'd never have time for anything else," I lightly replied.

She let out a sound that could be construed as amused.

"Perhaps there is some of the blood in you," she conceded.

That would have been slightly more touching if she hadn't just spent the better part of a month being a pain in my arse. If she wanted to rope me in using my Deoraithe heritage she was barking up the wrong tree, regardless. I knew nothing about my parents and to be frank I wasn't particularly curious. Whoever they'd been, they had nothing to do with the person I was now. Still, the woman did have twenty thousand soldiers under her command and they wouldn't be going anywhere after the scuffle against Akua was over. Needlessly antagonizing her would be foolish.

"All I've ever known of Daoine was through books," I said. "Oh, and one of your relatives that put an arrow in me that one time."

"You spared her," the Duchess said. "That did not go unnoticed."

Truth be told that had more to do with Black's orders than any notion of mine, but I saw no need to tell her that. That aside, wonder of wonders: for once my reputation for leaving a trail of corpses in my wake was coming in useful. People were starting to assume that whenever I didn't kill someone I did it on purpose.

"She's a talented archer," I said. "An inch to the side and it would have cleaved my spine. It'd be a shame to waste that kind of talent."

"High praise," Kegan said. "Perhaps she will live up to it today."

I raised an eyebrow.

"She's here?"

"She finished her oaths last year," the Duchess said. "The entire Watch was mobilized to put down the madwoman in the south. An

unexpected turn of events, that Daoine would share an enemy with you, but not entirely unwelcome."

Well now, that was positively friendly. I'd have to be a special kind of idiot for that sudden thawing of tone not to worry me. Especially since it was happening the first time we were having a conversation out of Marshal Ranker's earshot, surrounded only by soldiers known to be loyal to me. The picture that was painting was very, very dangerous. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. I could try to probe her intentions and beat around the bush, but that kind of game wasn't my specialty. I could cope with it in small doses, but I wasn't betting on getting the upper hand against a woman who'd ruled a duchy for several decades. Fuck it. It was sad to admit, but I had more burnt city incidents than diplomatic victories under my belt.

"You're talking a lot more sweetly than usual today," I bluntly said.

"There will be an after the war," Duchess Kegan said. "It is not too early to begin considering it."

"In my experience, people who talk that vague are tiptoeing about treason," I noted.

Her face showed no reaction. Why was everyone trying to negotiate with me so good at keeping their thoughts hidden?

"Your actions of late might be considered that," the Duchess said. "Dissolving the Ruling Council. Naming a former rebel Governess-General of Callow. Replacing every Praesi governor with a Callowan, save for one."

Denier, that. The man under Ranker's thumb had never given me an excuse so I'd had to settle for waiting out his term. I could see what she was hinting at, and I needed to shut down that avenue right now if I didn't want a third godsdamned civil war in a row to erupt the moment Diabolist's head ended up on a pike.

"Callow will stay under the Tower," I frankly replied. "That isn't up for debate. The nature of that relationship, however, will be renegotiated. I have backing in this."

The older woman's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Does the Carrion Lord mean to depose the Empress?" she asked, finally discarding the pretences.

"No," I replied, about as sure of this as I could be with someone like my teacher.

"Interesting days ahead," the Duchess finally said.

"Procer is coming," I said. "Not this year, I don't think, but within the decade."

"Offers were made, during the rebellion," Kegan acknowledged.

I'd always suspected, to be honest, but it was still an upset to have that suspicion confirmed. While I'd been fighting a war with swords against the Lone Swordsman, there'd been another war entirely going on behind the scenes. I was only now beginning to grasp the form of it, and what I learned was chilling.

"Let me guess," I said. "Independence and an alliance?"

"As well as a princess for my grandson, when they come of age," she replied.

"But you didn't bite," I said.

"Grudges incurred after the Third Crusade have yet to be settled," the Duchess said, tone harsh.

I frowned. The Deoraithe held on to slights like a drowning man to driftwood, but that still felt like too weak a reason. It wasn't like Praes hadn't taken regular runs at the Wall for over a thousand years. Hells, Dread Empress Triumphant had infamously crucified a King of Daoine for not bowing low enough.

"And?" I probed.

She hesitated, then continued.

"The Watch has guarded the Wall for a long time, Duchess Foundling, but that is not what it is *meant* for," she replied. "The border being quiet allows us to tend to an older duty."

There was fervour in her voice, by the time she finished speaking. *The Deoraithe hate the elves*. That was no great mystery. Perhaps not common knowledge, but any book about Daoine's history made a point of mentioning it – the Deoraithe had once lived in what was now the Golden Bloom before being driven out of it. Warlock had once theorized in front of me that the Watch was meant to imitate the strange abilities elves gained as they grew old, gaining through sorcery what the others were born to. Was that what she meant? That without the orcs raiding west Daoine could turn its attention to the elves?

"A conversation to finish at another time," Kegan said. "The duel you ordered is coming."

The entire conversation hadn't taken long, but in that span Hakram had made his way through Nauk's legionaries. My Adjutant had always been tall even for an orc, and I was almost certain he'd grown taller since coming into his Name. Not as broad-shouldered as Nauk or stout as Juniper, but he carried himself



with a *presence* nowadays that had an almost physical weight to it. He'd grown into his power and it showed. Hakram no longer used the sword and shield that had been his lot as a legionary: first he'd traded the sword for an axe, then the shield for another axe in the wake of our fights with the fae. He'd told me that if we were going to keep fighting creatures that could cut through steel like parchment he'd rather carry a second blade than dead weight. The weapon the orc took in hand as he strode onto the field was more a long and large hatchet than a battle axe in a conventional sense, goblin steel forged into a haft and head he still twirled like it weighed nothing. The Baron of Dawning Day ceased his strutting atop a horse when a challenger appeared, reining in his horse and guiding it to face Adjutant.

The legionaries in the first ranks began stomping their feet and it spread like fire among the Fifteenth, goblins and orcs and men of every stripe. The ground shook under two thousand steel-shod boots, and to that harsh meter voices rose to match.

"Dead the hand and dead the man,  
Sharp the blade and sharp the fang  
For no matter how tall they stand  
When iron rests we see them hang."

Hakram's stride went unbroken as he called out to the fae, his words drowned out by the voices and beat as to the sides of the host the other Legions of Terror joined their boots to the song. Ten thousand souls stomping as my legionaries sang their eerie anthem. The Baron of Dawning Day's lance descended and without any further taunts he charged.

"Lord or priest or knight in pale  
On burning hill or dawning vale  
The scale settles it all the same:  
Red and broken lies the name."

Adjutant did not move, calmly awaiting the charge. My heartbeat quickened at the sight, but I trusted in him. Given his size and strength, the natural comparison among the Calamities for my right hand was Captain. I'd fought them both, though, and knew that was a mistake. Sabah was strength and swiftness unrelenting, more hurricane than woman when moved to violence. Hakram... Hakram fought like Black. Even more than I did. Patient and measured and ruthlessly brutal in motion. The lance shone brightly under the sun, but still the orc did not move. Only when the mass of muscle and steel was teen strides away from him did his hand whip out: the axe spun, blade sinking through steel plate between the eyes of the Baron's charger.

"Dead the hand and dead the man,  
Sharp the blade and sharp the fang

For no matter how tall they stand  
When iron rests we see them hang.”

The white horse died and momentum carried it in a messy slide across the grass as the Baron deftly leapt off it and landed like a cat on the ground. Adjutant moved three steps to the side, taking his second axe in hand as the dead horse tumbled just past him. Casting his lance aside, the Baron of Dawning Day unsheathed a sword bright as the morning he was titled after. The orc awaited him patiently, unmoved by the sight. In the blink of an eye the fae was on him, sword leaving trails of light behind every swing as he furiously tried to take his opponent’s life. Calmly giving ground, Hakram avoided a cleave turned into a thrust a little too shallowly: the green skin of his cheek parted under fae steel, leaving a blackened mark like it had been burnt. The Baron avoided the haft of the axe with mocking ease, but it was a distraction: Adjutant’s fist caught him in the chin. Bone broke, for an orc’s strike was no small thing and this orc had strength beyond mortal bounds. Spitting teeth, the fae snarled furiously and harsh light bloomed in front of him. I sucked in a breath: even from where I stood I could feel the heat of it, and so close it would have been impossible for Hakram to dodge it.

“Queen or king or Heaven’s get  
Never unpaid goes their debt  
Learn bitter with the last breath  
The left hand gives only death.”

When the light died out, Adjutant’s smoking frame towered three feet back from where’d he’d been. He was steaming like cooked meat but unharmed. I could still feel the wisps of his Name on him, the remnants of the aspect he’d called on: Stand. He’d withstood the strike of a demon using it, once. Fae sorcery was lesser in comparison. I saw his axe had been turned to blackened scraps by the Baron’s power, though, and felt a sharp surge of fear. The sound of his laughter dispersed it. He’d been driven back to the horse’s side by the impact, and deftly he claimed back the axe he’d left in the mount’s head. He didn’t close the distance again, though, which I found strange. Though visibly shaken by the way his sorcery had failed to quell his opponent, the Baron immediately returned on the offensive. Light flared around the blade, and only then did I understand Adjutant’s intent. The orc’s legs lowered, the muscles of his arm flexed and his skeletal hand dug into the horse’s flesh: with a loud grunt, he seized the entire corpse like a mace and smashed it into the charging fae. The Baron hastily tried to cut through the flesh, but only succeeded in parting the belly: the mass still ploughed him downwards like a fragile doll. The carcass bubbled and burst in a shower of gore as the fae emerged, panting, but there was no recovering from his misstep. The crescent blade of the axe caught him in the neck, cleaving to the spine. The orc booted his

stomach to wrench the steel out, leaving him twitching in the gore, then calmly cleaved straight into his skull.

“Dead the hand and dead the man,  
Sharp the blade and sharp the fang  
For no matter how tall they stand  
When iron rests we see them hang.”

Dead. And now, just now, when the sight of it was still fresh in the eyes of the fae above? That was the moment to strike. Even as thousands of feet thundered in approval and Hakram’s blood-red axe rose to the sky, I drew Duchess Kegan’s attention.

“Now,” I said. “Send them in now.”

The older woman nodded slowly, still troubled by what she’d just seen, and drew a red scarf from a pouch on her side before holding it up. Without a sound, two thousand men and women of the Watch broke into a perfect run. Like the song had said, there were scales to settle.

And like the song had said, Summer would lie red and broken for it.

## Chapter 26: Advance

*“You’d be surprised at the breadth of things that can be powered by the souls of the innocent. Fortresses, swords, my favourite chandelier.”*

– Dread Empress Malevolent II

Calling how they moved a formation would have been inaccurate.

A tide, maybe, or wisp of fog. The grey-brown cloaks fluttered behind them as the Watch charged towards the fortress, the fae only recovering from the sight of my right hand slaughtering their champion when the Deoraithe were mere feet away from the base of the rampart. A volley of flame-touched arrows bloomed, but it was like trying to catch smoke in your hand: the flames touched only the ground and the Watch began its ascent. Duchess Kegan had said that they wouldn’t need ladders, and now I saw why. Every soldier took out a pair of steel stakes and I watched as the first to move forward leapt up before ramming his first stake into the stone. Using it as support, he threw himself up and bit into stone with his other stake. A flick of the wrist got the first stake out of the stone, and then he hoisted himself up again. Twenty feet up the wall, in the blink of an eye. *Merciless Gods*, I thought. I might have been able to do that, but one of my soldiers? Suddenly Daoine’s dream of taking the fight to the elves seemed more than an elaborate ritual suicide.

The fae did not lose their composure, continuing to pour down arrows. At my side Duchess Kegan raised her hand again, a black scarf in hand. The three thousand remaining soldiers of the Watch, longbows already strung, released a volley of their own. The arc was perfect, almost pleasurable to watch, at though the projectiles were mere steel they scythed through the Summer fairies who'd been careless enough to leave the protection of the crenels. A burning log was tossed over the rampart but the Deoraithe did not miss a beat. Those allowed room by the angle pressed themselves against the stone and let it pass them by, and a woman whose chest would have been caved in instead leapt *atop* the log, using it to leap again upwards and resume climbing with her stakes. *And Grem One-Eye beat them*, I thought. *When they were defending their own damned wall*. I'd always thought that in a few years after she was seasoned Juniper would be the best tactician on Calernia, bar none, but what I saw was forcing me to reconsider. It was one thing to beat devils, another to crush *this*.

Less than eighty heartbeats after they'd begun moving, just after another volley shot by the Watch who'd stayed behind forced the fae to take cover, the first Deoraithe landed on top of the wall. The fighting then was not so one-sided: Kegan's monsters were quicker and stronger than humans had any right to be, but so were the fae. Longsword met longsword as a dozen footholds formed on the rampart, but the Watch had not been deployed to take the wall. As soon as the last Deoraithe made it up, the clusters moved again and disappeared into the fortress. Headed for the gate, no doubt. *My turn*. Nauk's men made way for me as I marched to the front of the two thousand legionaries of the Fifteenth, eyes on the still-closed gates. Adjutant joined me moments later, armour blackened by the sorcery of the baron he'd put down.

"They're impressive," the orc gravelled. "Maybe the finest soldiers on Calernia, pound for pound."

I hummed, not disagreeing. Now that the initial shock at their performance had waned, though, I felt that I was missing something. Only a quarter of Duchess Kegan's army was made up by the Watch. Why, if they were so effective? If she had twenty thousand of them the Wall would never have fallen during the Conquest. Were there requirements to being able to become part of the Watch? It couldn't be that they were all mages. Deoraithe weren't known to birth a lot of those, and no one had five thousand mages to field save for Praes – who'd bred those numbers up over millennia – and perhaps Procer, by sheer dint of its population's size.

"Resource investment," I murmured.

Hakram raised a brow.

"Legion officers and mages take half a decade to train properly," I said. "The Empire can bear that because it's rich and its population large. Daoine is a *duchy*, not a kingdom. They might not have the means to support too many of those – that kind of power can't come without a material cost."

Praesi were wealthy beyond comprehension and cheated with blood sacrifices besides, otherwise raising even a single flying fortress would beggar the Tower for half a decade. Deoraithe didn't have that shortcut available, though. Them grabbing people to sacrifice, even if they kept it strictly in-house, would have been noticed eventually.

"Every time one of them dies a small fortune goes up in smoke," Hakram grasped, brow creasing. "They do have the population to field a larger army than twenty thousand. A choice was made."

"Quality over quantity," I said. "They began treading that path long before the Reforms took Praes down the same road."

Duchess Kegan's hand, then, was not as strong as she had been pretending. How many years would it take to replace any casualty incurred by the Watch? She might be able to afford that in times of peace, but if she ever warred against the Empire her treasury would be bleeding out from a dozen different unavoidable expenses. If I could realize this at a glance, I had a hard time believing that Malicia and Black could not. Was that why they'd never acted like they considered Daoine a real threat? Something to keep in mind, when I next spoke with the duchess. It was not long after we finished speaking that the gates began moving, a dozen silhouettes on each side pushing the massive copper things open. In front of them the rest of the Watch had clustered together in a tight formation, and the moment the way was clear they began a smooth and almost leisurely retreat. I unsheathed my sword, raising the blade.

"FIFTEENTH," I screamed. "ADVANCE!"

The nut had been cracked open. Now the butcher's work could begin. The ranks behind were four hundred broad, following behind just short of a run as Hakram and I took point. The retreating Deoraithe split around us, a few of them ceasing their retreat just long enough to shoot arrows at fae trying to close the gates before we arrived. *Fifty feet*, I gauged. The soldiers of Summer behind the gate hurriedly sent a volley at the Fifteenth, the same kind of chest-height shots that had torn through the Gallowborne. This wasn't my retinue, though. It was a full *jesha* of two thousand, half the forces making up a regular Legion of Terror. These men had been trained to deal with mages, and without missing a beat the mage lines within the Fifteenth returned fire. A wave of fireballs flew, tailored for size instead of strength or speed: the spells taught in the War College were not the most powerful or the most effective. They

were the most *flexible*, the formula easy to adjust for the situation. Every mage cast, and when the large balls of flame met the arrows a curtain of flame flickered across the grounds. Not a single projectile made it through. Heat licking at my face, I strode through the already-fading fire. *Twenty feet.*

"Been a while since we were in a scrap side-by-side," I said.

"Liesse, I think," Hakram mused. "Learned a few things since then."

"So have I," I said. "Try to keep up."

There were maybe ten feet between me and the fae when I dashed forward, sinking into my Name. I'd always found clarity in doing that, in allowing the world to slow as my perception deepened and my blade followed, but it was different now. The air no longer felt just crisp, it was *cold* – like a windless winter night, everything tinged with frost. An arrow flew towards my throat but my sword came up without missing a beat, slapping it to the side as I pivoted on myself and fell on the first rank of the fae. At my side a roar sounded and blood sprayed high as Adjutant began to paint in red. We hit their line like a trebuchet stone, ploughing straight through. There was no room for elaborate tactics, here, no Lion Devours Gazelle. If they didn't hold the gate, they were done for: they had to stand and fight. It would be a red gutter before long, and the gutter was where I shone. One of the fae threw tongues of flame at me and I didn't even bother to dodge them: they hit my armour head on with only hissing steam to show for it, the ice-cold steel unmarred. My shield hit the opponent in the stomach, smashing him back, and I gutted him with a clean sword stroke.

Adjutant stood at my side, sweeping the enemy aside with wild laughter as we drive deeper and deeper. There was a deafening sound behind us as Nauk's heavies impacted the fae line, orcs and humans in a tightly-locked shield wall beginning their push. This was not the kind of battle the Summer fae were meant for, I thought. Not these, anyway. Mere swords and bows were no match for the implacable advancing steel wall of the Legions of Terror. The path Hakram and I were carving through the enemy filled with soldiers, a wedge in the enemy formation that split them. Already they were wavering – the Watch had killed hundreds on their way through, and what stood behind us now was not the full strength of the enemy. There still had to be some left on the walls.

"*Spargere*," an officer's voice called out.

Small clay balls with lit fuses sailed above the ranks, falling in the throng of fae. The sharpeners exploded a moment later, shredding flesh and bone. With a resounding cry the shield wall pushed forward and the army of Summer folded under the pressure.

"Fire," the same voice called out.

Four dozen balls of flame flew above the fae ranks. They wouldn't hit anyone, but they weren't meant to. One by one they detonated, the pressure flattening the fairies under them even if they didn't kill anyone. The fae lines wavered and again the cry sounded, the shield wall pushing forward. I'd been killing my way through anything foolish enough to stand in my way, the tip of the spear, and finally I saw only one woman in front of me – behind her was an empty courtyard, leading deeper into the fortress. There was fear in her too-large eyes. Her sword parried my blow, but her grips was weak. With a grunt I pushed down, flexing my muscles as she joined a second hand to her first and desperately tried to hold me back. Too weak. I broke through her guard, carving her from shoulder to rib across the body. After so many strikes against armour even the goblin steel of my sword was starting to dull, but with enough power behind the blow that mattered little. I stepped onto the courtyard lightly the sound of fangs tearing through flesh heralding Adjutant following me as he tossed a corpse with a ripped throat to the side. Heavies filled the corridor we'd open, splitting the fae in two, and it was the beginning of the end for them. They began to break.

"We can leave them to Nauk," I said. "We have a Count to settle matters with."

The orc nodded, licking reddened chops. The inside of the castle was still made of the same white stone, but in the shady corners I saw roots peeking through. Count of Olden Oak, huh. Might be more to the title than just heraldry. A set of stairs led to the upper keep and without wasting any more time I began the way up. We passed through an empty banquet hall without slowing, my gaze lingering at the larger and larger amount of roots I saw growing through the stone from every corner. Was this entire fortress a tree, the oak the fae noble was named for? I knew fuck all about what oaks actually looked like, having been raised in a city, so I could be looking at one for all I knew. There was another set of stairs in the back of the hall and we headed there, the both of us feeling the pressure coming from higher in that direction. We ended up in a corridor covered with living mosaics of leaves that shifted with every glance but didn't stick around to look at them: through an arc we could see a third and final set of stairs, leading to what I would have called a basilica if the the coloured glass of its windows didn't display the glory of Summer victorious.

The way up was long and sharply sloped, the stairs broad and too large to be covered in one stride. The sun shone down, but it was not illuminating stone: we were surrounded by the brown bark of an immense oak, growing in the centre of the towers we'd glimpsed from the outside. The large structure ahead had coppers doors

like the outer fortress, though these were wide open. The atmosphere was eerily green-tinged.

"Twenty denarii he's waiting for us inside on some kind of oaken throne," I said.

"I'm not taking that," Hakram snorted. "Twenty denarii we get a monologue about the might of Summer before the fight."

We kept moving even as we talked but the moment we rose onto the first step the strange buzz of fae wings sounded in the utter silence. From the heights of the giant tree ten fae descended on translucent wings, landing halfway up the steps with unnatural grace. Each of them held a leaf-shaped shield and a long lance of wood. I raised an eyebrow.

"So if he'd been called the Count of Plentiful Cows, would you be fighting with udders and hooves?" I called out.

The words echoed across the distance, my mockery repeating twice more before fading.

"Though crowd," Adjutant deadpanned.

The ten fae spread in a line without replying, wings flickering out of existence, and the spears rose. Since the grim-faced pricks weren't willing to save us the climb before we fought it out, we began the way up. I caught Hakram studying them carefully as we rose then punched his shoulder to draw his attention, eyebrow raised.

"Go to the Count," he gravelled. "I'll handle them."

"You've used one aspect already," I frowned. "And your other one's not much use in a fight."

The tall orc bared his fangs.

"I feel... close," he said. "To the third."

Ah, and now I understood why he'd suggested it. Iron sharpens iron, Praesi were fond of saying. They meant it as a justification for their obsession with scheming against one another, but I'd found the saying had some truth in it. For both villains and heroes, conflict drove advancement. No, perhaps that wasn't exact. Weighty actions allowed you to sharpen your Name, and conflict had a way of birthing those. Whether it was arguing with an enemy or beating them down, a Named could temper themselves. It wasn't that Hakram thought he'd stomp over all these fae – they were obviously meant to be an elite guard of some kind, no matter how ridiculous their equipment. But he believed that a dangerous enough fight might allow him to reach his third aspect.



"I don't like risking you," I said, more honestly than I'd meant it to. "Duel's one thing, this is just taking a risk to hurry something you'll get eventually."

He half-smiled, which given the size of his teeth still made him look more horrifying than sentimental.

"You can't be the only one taking risks," he chided. "And we'll need all we can bring to bear, soon. If not for this war then for the next."

I was still less than fond of this idea. It wasn't just that finding a replacement for Adjutant would be impossible, though there was no denying that was a fact. Even if Apprentice fused Ratface and Aisha into a single abomination of nature the combined talents wouldn't be able to handle a tenth of the work he did. Hakram was my friend. Gods, probably the person I was closest to in all of Creation. My first instinct was to kill anything that might threaten him and put the head on a spike to ward off anybody else who might want to try. I knew that look in his eyes, though. It was the same one he got before disappearing for a few bells and a problem mysteriously solved itself – there would be no talking him out of this no matter how much I glared.

"Wade in their blood, Hakram," I finally said, raising a gauntleted fist.

"Luck in battle, Catherine," he replied, hitting his fist with mine.

We were only two steps away from the fae, and they'd yet to move. I supposed they thought it made them look imposing.

"The way is barred," a fae said.

"So was the front gate," I replied.

I dashed forward, sending a sliver of power into my legs. Bypassing a step entirely I landed in front of the rightmost fae, whose spear immediately whistled towards my throat. From the corner of my eye I saw movement – ridiculous as they looked, they were quicker than the soldiers from earlier and better coordinated. If it had come to a scrap that would have mattered, but unfortunately for them fleeing was another game entirely. I formed a circular panel of shadow in the way of the one trying to flank me and ducked under the spear of the other, never breaking stride. Wouldn't have worked if I was any taller, but for once being so offensively short was an advantage. The shadow pane shattered a heartbeat later, but I was already on the step behind them. I glanced back and saw that none of them was deigning to pursue. Hakram ripped the shield out of the hands of one and smacked another fae's face with it, but he was surrounded within moments and the situation looked sharply to his disadvantage. My

fingers tightened until the gauntlet creaked, but I forced myself to look away and continued my way up. He wouldn't have told me he could handle it if he couldn't.

I forced myself to clear my mind the way I'd been taught even as I headed up to the structure that was the crowning glory of the fortress, the very heart of the Count's domain. From the sides of the stairway – there were no rails here either, though unlike with the Tower I was willing to cut Summer some slack since at least they could fly back up if they fell – I could see roots leading up to the inside of the building. Well, that was promising. I'd seen my fair share of fucking horrors in Winter, I supposed I was due exposure to the other side of the coin. The copper gates were open, like I'd seen earlier, but as I made it to the top I finally got a glance inside. For the first time since breaching the fortress, what I saw gave me pause. It wasn't the tall silhouette of the Count that gave me pause, his back turned to me as he gazed out the green and red glass in front of him. It was the sight of the inside of the basilica, though the living wood that made hundreds of stacks filled with books and baubles was a stunning sight. No, it was the hundred corpses of the Gallowborne that hung from the branches covering the ceiling.

I let out a long, quiet breath. Fury was not unknown to me. I'd felt both boiling anger and frozen, bitter hatred since I'd become the Squire. But the sight of men and women who'd died for me trussed up like trophies in someone's sanctum killed the emotions in me. I'd seen the Carrion Lord once. The monster the tales spoke of, instead of the sardonic teacher I'd come to love. Seen the humanity in him smothered like a candle, leaving behind only a thing capable of anything if it furthered its objectives. If someone was looking at my face right now, I thought, they might just see the same thing. He'd told me, once that were the same in some ways. Maybe he was right, because right now I felt capable of being monstrous. My footsteps broke the silence in the room as I walked forward, the heartbeats of the Beast echoing in turn. It was there, I knew as well as I knew my own breath. Still as the grave, but looking at the Count with my eyes. It did not delight in the violence to come, for once. It *bowled* to it.

"I'd never considered any of this personal," I heard myself say, my tone without a speck of feeling. "I am, after all, invading your home. You've not participated in the invasion of Callow, and my only reasons for sieging this keep were of a strategic nature."

The Count of Olden Oak turned to face me, tall wooden spear in hand.

"But this?" I murmured, looking at the corpses of people I'd known, trained with, laughed with. "This was a choice. Those have consequences."

"Duchess of Moonless Night," the fae greeted me calmly. "You seem displeased."

"We passed civil the moment you hung up those corpses," I said. "I could torture you for this, I suppose, but that's a cheap sort of satisfaction. Meaningless, really. There's no evening this particular scale."

"Winter pretending to be righteous," the man mocked. "A farce of farces."

"I revoke your right to exist," I said, tone measured. "I will take what I want from you, and then you will end."

He opened his mouth to speak again but I shot forward. The man wore no armour, only green robes, but with fae that meant nothing. My sword came down but the shaft of the spear caught it – whatever sorcery was in the wood made it harder than steel, my blade bouncing off. I was past caring. I smashed my shield into his shoulder, but his hand came up to block it: green light shone on his palm and the momentum of the strike vanished. I gave ground, stepping back and slowly circling around him. Swift as a hawk he struck, spear aiming for my eyes, but I hit the tip of his spear with the top of my shield to knock it off course. The spear rose past my head but instantly a branch grew from it, whistling towards my throat. I blinked in surprise as it pierced straight through, only backing away in time to prevent it from severing my spine. My vocal chords were done for, but I no longer needed to speak an aspect to call on it. **Rise**, I thought. The wound slowly began to close even as the branch that had grown from the spear withdrew back into it. So this was a Count of Summer, I thought. I had no makeshift prophecy protecting me from this one, no shield of lies to blunt his power.

He would lose regardless.

I moved forward again and the spear whipped out, tearing a hole through my shield – a last moment adjustment prevented it from piercing through the hand that held it. He made to withdraw the spear but I focused my will and the ice welled from the steel and froze it stuck inside. I managed to swing at his face before he forced it out anyway, twisting away from my blow – I cut clean just underneath his eye. Green light came out instead of blood, bark growing to fill the wound. I was not the only one with a healing ability, it seemed. The hole in my shield froze shut with dark ice and I went back on the offensive: his growing trick was too dangerous to allow him the initiative. The tip of my blade probed his guard as I angled my feet for a thrust, his eyes flickering down to notice it. The Beast howled. When he slapped aside the thrust with his spear I was already moving, twisting the momentum into a pivot that smashed into his spear when he managed to block it again. I tore through no flesh, but the strength behind the strike threw him back a few feet. I was

stronger than him, then. My title of Duchess was not entirely meaningless.

The spear snaked forward as he moved towards me, casually slapped aside. Even as it passed my flank I saw the branch grow and head for my kidneys, but I was ready for it this time. I dropped my sword and caught the bursting wood with my hand, forcefully moving it aside. Ice glistened on the lower edge of my shield, sharpening it like a blade, and I rammed that edge into his shoulder. I cut through the robe and he hissed in pain, then wrenched out the shield while throwing myself to the side before the two branches growing from the first one he'd made could punch through between my ribs. I landed in a roll, without a weapon, and the Count smirked. Green light shone the gaping wound going from his shoulder to his pectorals, bark filling it instantly. I flicked my wrist and Pickler's contraption triggered, a knife slapping down onto my palm. My Senior Sapper had made sure that there would always be steel in my hand when I needed it, her sharp little mind ever-refining the tool I'd once used when fighting the Lone Swordsman.

"You seem to be at a disadvantage, Duchess," the fae mocked.

I had no interest in trading barbs with meat. I charged again but found the distance between us had been too lengthy: the Count flicked his fingers at me, a dozen strands of green light shooting towards my chest as I advanced. I stepped aside, adjusted my angle and continued moving forward but he still had control of the sorcery: the strands struck down at my boot, roots growing from them and nailing me to the floor. My momentum cut short, I had to force myself back in order to avoid tripping. Immediately the fae struck, moving to the side my shield didn't cover with the grace of a cat. My knife wouldn't be able to do much against the spear, at this distance. *You have made a mistake*, I thought with vindictive satisfaction. I adjusted my grip on the knife to be the same I'd use for a sword, and then with a flicker of will from the short blade a full sword length of dark ice grew. I cut through the spear, and thought it immediately began to grow back his eyes widened.

I tore through my boot out of the roots effortlessly. I'd already proved I beat him in raw strength – arrogant of him to think he could bridge the gap with sorcery. My shield hit his stomach, knocking the breath out of him without his little healing being of any use. My blade carved straight through the wrist that held the spear, and though it grew back in bark that didn't bring back the weapon to his hand. Sorcery attempted to do so, but when it began rising from the ground I exerted my will again and froze it stuck. I cut his throat, without missing a beat. Green light filled the wound, but I was already striking again. I sliced through his eyes and he screamed, but a heavy groan sounded out behind me. I risked a glance and saw that a hundred spears of

wood were descending from the branches covering the ceiling. In that heartbeat, the world slowed. I could move out of the way, give ground again and avoid the danger. But I didn't want to. I wanted to crush him under my boot, and the bone-deep hatred I'd felt when first entering Summer well up in response.

I didn't set it aside, this time. I took it, owned it, carved it into a weapon. It was mine, and it would answer to my will like any other aspect.

**"Fall,"** I said.

The world went dark. A boundless night sky spread above us, without a single speck of light to break the black. There was a cold here that was old and merciless, and the branches that would have pierced me slowed and turned grey. The sap inside them froze and they *died*. The Count of Olden Oak's bark-crafted eyes stared blindly into the dark as he panicked. I could feel a flame inside him, feel it dimming with every passing heartbeat. Frost spread across his body slowly, and I could feel him on the brink of death. I smiled and the night went away, wrenching me back into the sunlit basilica. He was barely conscious now, so little of him left a child could have beaten him to death. His power would grow back, though, given enough time.

"Oh, you don't get to die yet," I said. "I still have a use for you."

What little was left of his mind smelled of fear, and it was not unwarranted.

## **Chapter 27: Expedition**

*"No matter how hallowed the crown, it fits only one head."*  
– Proceran saying

There were no maps. That was the great dangers of Arcadia, I was learning. Well, that and the fact that it was a shifting hellscape filled with quarrelsome demigods. I'd not realized until now how much planning a march depended on the maps provided to Fifteenth by the Tower: we had no idea what was ahead of us now, and any reports brought back by scouts might have become inaccurate by the time we reached the place they'd been. I knew where we needed to go – could feel it in the back of my head like an unmoving iron spike – but that knowledge came without a precise idea of the distance I needed to march. Based on the last two times I'd travelled to Arcadia I was guessing about six days, but that was a *guess*. We could be here for a fortnight if I was misjudging the situation. We'd set out with rations for three weeks, expecting to resupply when we met up with the Fifteenth back in Creation, and we had since... expanded our granaries. The regulations for the Legions of Terror forbade looting, but I was

Named: I could overrule those whenever I wished. They were mostly meant to avoid antagonizing local populations when the Empire took territory, anyway, so I was breaking the letter more than the spirit.

And Hells, since for once in my life I wasn't fighting in my own homeland I'd ordered Robber to loot this fucking fortress to the bedrock. Taking anything heavy would only slow us down, but there was plenty of jewellery, gold and silver lying around. It would have been better to have Ratface along for that – the Taghreb was capable of squeezing silver out of stone, given a bell – but he was more useful to me at Juniper's side, preparing the second phase of our campaign against Summer. Night fell all too quickly as the armies camped around the fortress, torches and bonfires lighting up the dark. I'd claimed the basilica where I'd beaten the Count as my command centre, and it was where I'd be holding my meeting with the senior staff of the combined armies. Passing the banquet hall I'd glimpsed on my way up earlier in the day I raised an amused eyebrow at the sight of two goblins with knives prying out the gilding from the corner of the high table before shoving the gold in a bag. Enterprising lot, Robber's cohort. I decided not to ask how they'd gotten so good at ripping off precious metals from objects, since I'd really prefer not to know.

The Summer Court was torching southern Callow, it was only fitting that their own treasures would pay for the rebuilding of it. The Deoraithe were too proud to ask for a cut and Ranker was from the generation that had drafted the regulations I was breaking, so amusingly enough it was all going in my war chest.

The entire fortress had been ours a half-bell after I'd smacked down the Count, Nauk's men sweeping in and the other two Legions taking the walls on the sides when the fae there pulled back to deal with my men. Ten corpses and a bloodied but satisfied Adjutant had been waiting for me when I first left the basilica – he'd gotten his aspect, he'd said, but he'd rather keep what it was exactly under wraps for now. The fae personal guard looked like they'd been hacked to death with his axe, not some power, so I was rather interested in what had allowed him to bridge the gap. It could wait, though. If there was one thing I'd learned about aspects in the years since I first became the Squire, it was that they were trump cards best kept quiet until they could shine. The knowledge that I had Struggle, back in the day, had allowed the Lone Swordsman to plan around it. Best to leave Hakram's new weapon unknown until it could be slapped down on the table at our enemy's detriment. The officers were already waiting for me when I passed the still-open copper doors, settled around a large circular table clearly stolen from another part of the castle. It still had dried blood on it, not that anybody seemed to care. No insulting slogans had been carved on the surface,

though, so it probably wasn't a goblin who'd found it. They liked to leave a mark, my little monsters.

This particular meeting had required broader attendance than the usual triumvirate of Ranker, Kegan and I: a hooded figure from the Watch stood silently behind the seated Duchess. At the Marshal's side an old acquaintance was frowning, General Afolabi. He seemed displeased that Nauk was in attendance, representing my jesha from the Fifteenth. I could see his point – as a mere legate the large orc was by far the lowest-ranked person here – but he could put his objections in a pipe and smoke them, for all I cared. Speaking of. I took out the dragonbone pipe Masego had once gifted me and ripped a small pouch of wakeleaf. I'd earned it, after today. I struck a match on my aketon and inhaled in puffs until fire caught, tossing aside the blacked pinewood. In my absence, Adjutant had been more or less in charge. Though his official rank in the Legions was technically below that of a tribune, by virtue of being Named and my right hand there was no one here who could gainsay him about much of anything.

"Done stripping the place clean?" Ranker said as I claimed the seat across from her.

I inhaled with a sigh of pleasure, then blew the smoke idly.

"Jealousy is unseemly in a woman of your rank," I replied with a smug smile.

Hakram cleared his throat.

"You all know why you're here," the orc gravelled. "Casualty reports first."

"Twenty-nine dead," Kegan said calmly. "The wounded will be back on their feet by morning."

Merciless Gods, and they'd been the ones to scale the walls. Everyone and their sister had a bloody arcane weapon, these days. It was a good thing I'd reinstated a knightly order, because otherwise I was going to be the only one on the field without some awe-striking shock troops to deploy.

"Two hundred and change dead," Nauk volunteered. "Mages are handling our wounded, maybe another fifty will need to stick with the supplies for the rest of the march."

"Less than a hundred for the Fourth and the Twelfth together," Ranker said. "The Fifteenth took the brunt of the assault for us."

Two thousand fae in a heavily fortified position, and we'd wiped them out with fewer than five hundred casualties in the span of a

day. I could get used to being the one with the numerical advantage, if things went that smoothly every time.

"From my interrogation of the Count of Olden Oak I learned that these were Summer regulars," I said. "A border garrison to check Winter aggression. Half their number was stripped when the Princess of High Noon invaded Creation."

"If this is the quality of soldiery we'll be facing, perhaps this entire matter has been overly planned," Duchess Kegan noted.

Marshal Ranker hacked out a laugh.

"This was a siege, you twit," she said. "Not what those boys are meant for. On a plain with equal numbers and some nobles to back them they'll be trouble."

The hooded man behind the Duchess stirred at the insult but Kegan settled him with a glance. I watched the interplay without a word, pulling at my pipe. The wakeleaf was blunting the sharper edges of my mood, perhaps for the best.

"I agree with the Marshal's assessment," Hakram said. "They showed their mettle when they tangled with the Gallowborne: if they catch any of our infantry without crossbows or mages, it will go very differently."

"Which leads us to the crux of this matter," Afolabi said. "Where are we headed, Lady Squire? Surely you made inquiries with your prisoner."

The Count of Olden Oak was currently a guest of the Fifteenth, tied up under seventeen layers of wards and a rotating watch of mages. I'd been forced leave so many to the task that to take care of my wounded I'd had to send for mages from the Fourth.

"We're headed for the lands of the Princess Sulia, as some of you are already aware," I said. "When politely asked, our friend revealed that it'll be mostly a straight march to there. Only two obstacles in the way: a river and the keep of the Count of Golden Harvest. We're in luck for the second one – the Count is currently in Creation, along with most his troops."

"Is there a bridge or a ford?" Ranker asked, leaning forward.

"There's supposed to be a bridge, if we keep down the road that led us here," I said. "I wouldn't count on it still being standing, though. They had time to send messengers before we took the fortress."

"As long as the bare bones of s structure remain my sappers can take care of it," the Marshal dismissed.



"We'll be relying on you, then," I acknowledged, spewing out a stream of smoke. "Even if the river was swimmable we have too many supply carts for that to be valid way across."

"We should begin marching before dawn," Duchess Kegan said. "We've already wasted a day on this castle. The longer we tarry the higher the chances the armies in Callow are recalled."

None of us was eager at the idea of fighting the higher ranks of the Summer Court on their own ground. In Creation their power was limited, but out here? There were some entities numbers meant nothing again and the Princess of High Noon struck me as one.

"Forced march," Nauk grunted in agreement. "We're in their lands now. Our way to get out of this with most our feathers is to be gone by the time they'd done mobilizing."

"We'll exhaust our soldiers if we follow your... *plan*," General Afolabi drawled in disdain. "And risk ambush, if we move hurriedly. Legionaries dead on their feet will be ill-equipped to handle fae harassment."

"The orc is right," Duchess Kegan retorted flatly. "Better we lost a few hundreds to ambushes than thirty thousand to a hopeless pitched battle."

"Nauk," I said, and though my tone was calm it sounded out like a clap. "The *orc*'s name is Legate Nauk of the Fifteenth Legion."

The Deoraithe met my eyes, displeased, but I matched her stare. We both knew I was in the right in this. Eventually she nodded, lips thinned.

"Legate Nauk is correct," she conceded.

I smiled mirthlessly, blowing out smoke. If she wanted to keep on good terms with me Kegan would need to watch her fucking mouth around my people.

"Whatever the pace, we need eyes ahead," Ranker spoke into the silence. "The Fourth and the Twelfth have scouting contingents. Your detached cohort under the Special Tribune can join them."

"I have another task for them that'll take them away from the army," I refused. "Consider them unavailable for the foreseeable future."

"What *are* they doing?" Afolabi asked.

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"The matter is sealed, General," I replied. "I will unveil it when I deem it necessary."

"This isn't the time to play mysterious," the man said through gritted teeth. "We're in hostile territory with no path of retreat. Recklessness will get us *killed*. Your last gamble torched a third of Summerholm, Squire. We cannot afford a repeat performance."

From the corner of my eye I saw Nauk's fist clench and he half-rose from his seat but Hakram sent him a quelling look. I drummed my fingers against the table lightly, taking the pipe out of my mouth.

"You're leading to something," I said. "Spit it out."

"Marshal Ranker has the rank and the experience to make the proper decisions," the Soninke said. "Command of the expedition should be formally ceded to her."

I glanced at the goblin in question. She didn't seem surprised, but neither did she seem appreciative. Not her idea? Hard to tell.

"No army of Daoine will ever take orders from Praesi," Duchess Kegan replied coldly.

"Marshal Ranker?" I prompted, tone light.

"You've yet to make a major mistake," the goblin said. "Doesn't mean you won't."

Mhm, there were subtleties to that reply. She wasn't disagreeing with Afolabi, but she was distancing herself from the push somewhat. Either she was leaving herself room to throw him under the carriage after using him as a catspaw or she truly had nothing to do with this.

"You fucking Wastelander prick," Nauk growled. "Do you really think you-"

"Nauk," I interrupted without looking at him. "Sit down."

He did. He'd heard me use this voice before.

"I've perhaps been too lenient," I said. "I do have less experience than most the commanders at this table, hence why I've been taking advice. But allow me to make something perfectly clear, General."

The temperature in the room descended sharply, and for once it was on purpose. I met the Soninke's eyes, and to his honour he did not flinch.

"I am in command," I said, cocking my head to the side. "Here. In Callow. Wherever we meet for the rest of your natural life. I'm not going to threaten you over this, or seek revenge for the

slight. To be frank, you're just not *important* enough for me to spend that much time on you."

The man blanched in anger. I set my pipe on the table and slid it towards him.

"I could speak to you," I noted. "But I don't really need to, do I? Whine all you like, we both know the chain of command here. So what you're going to do instead is head downstairs to the kitchens, to clean my pipe. When you're done, you may come back and sit at the table."

I tapped my fingers against the table impatiently.

"Now," I ordered.

Choking on his rage, the man snatched the pipe off the table and strode away. That was the last sliver of attention I gave him.

"As Marshal Ranker said, we should send scouts to have a look down the road as soon as possible," I said, continuing as if nothing had happened. "Duchess Kegan, given the speed the Watch has shown I would trouble you to send a detachment of it ahead to check on the state of the bridge."

"I've a hundred used to going into the Steppes to map orc movements," the Deoraithe replied, tacitly agreeing.

It wasn't that she was cowed, because she wasn't. Neither was Ranker, for that matter. They'd both dealt with scarier villains than me, though I was playing catch up in that regard. But I'd just made it clear that, if pushed, I was willing to push back. I might still be too young for them to see me as an equal but I was, at least, not someone to be fucked with lightly. It would be enough for now. I glanced at Hakram, and he began speaking again.

"Now," he began, "for the forces we'll dedicate to guarding the supply train."

—

We were back on the road by dawn the following morning. The first day was uneventful, but that very night we first saw the signs of trouble to come. None of the armies involved had set up a fortified camp before dark, given the pace we were putting the soldiers through. It would only slow us down, and given that the Deoraithe did not practice the same doctrine the meat of our army would be unprotected besides. Double watch and a ring of fires had been deemed barley sufficient, but if we'd not posted goblins out we would have still missed the fae studying us in the dark. Only a handful and far out of the light cast by the fires, but to goblins the dark made no difference. No attack followed, but from then on it was clear there was an enemy force watching us. That

we could only guess at the size and position of it was dangerous, given how good at ambushes Summer had already shown itself to be. The lack of attack, though, led me to a theory. Arcadia ran on stories, didn't it? More than that, on story *logic*. Time and distance were dictated as a consequence, unless a bigwig like the King of Winter decided otherwise.

If I was right, then it would all play out when we got to Princess Sulia's lands. One the last day, at the last moment. I spent most of the second day's march trying out the notion, thinking of how it could be turned to my advantage. No sign of the fae in daylight, though the Watch detachment Kegan had promised came back with news: they'd found the bridge. As expected, it had been scuttled ahead of us. Ranker spent an hour asking the cloaked soldiers for details before declaring she could have a bridge able to support two carts at a time up in a bell and a half. I'd eat into the day's march, but swimming was apparently not an option: the current was harsh and the river broad. When we camped out for the night I sent for a tenth of mages, half of what the Fifteenth had left – the rest had all gone with Robber. More than once during the night I wished I had Masego or even Kilian along, instead of these ones. The difference in skill showed badly. I emerged only around morning bell, exhausted, and found I wasn't the only one in that state. The fae had hit us during the night, in a manner of speaking.

A handful of soldiers had appeared at the edge of the camp and shot fire arrows at the tents of the Fourth, retreating before a response could be mustered. The damage was minimal so Ranker had originally thought this to be the work of a few reckless fae scouts, but when the attack repeated at the edge of the Twelfth's camp the Marshal and the Duchess understood exactly what was happening. Both goblins and Deoraithe were familiar with the kind of tactics a smaller mobile force could use against a larger invading one. Every hour or so fae popped out of the woodworks and shot their arrows, not to kill or even burn supplies but to keep our soldiers awake. They were eroding strength through exhaustion, and not even the Watch was able to catch up to them on their home grounds. They succeeded in their ploy, to my irritation, and there was little I could do about it. We allowed the soldiers to rest for a few hours during the afternoon when we finally reached the bridge and Ranker put her sappers to work. So far we'd been left untouched during daylight, but I was of the opinion they were trying to make us drop our guards during the day in anticipation of a strike. The other two agreed.

Attacks intensified during the third night, to my mounting frustration. We'd camped on the other side of the river in case they torched the bridge Ranker had built during the night – it was wooden – and it proved a farsighted precaution. It went up in flames mere hours after nightfall, cutting off our best path of retreat. Putting together our scout reports, we'd come to the

conclusion that there were only about three hundred fae currently harassing us. A flea on the lion's back, but the lion was having a hard time getting a good night's rest. This time they went for out sentinels shortly before dawn, and we had to rouse the infantry to force them to retreat. It was on the fourth day they attacked, though not exactly in the manner we'd predicted. A full two thousand fae led by a noble tore into our scouts ahead of the column. I hesitated to sally out myself, since I wasn't sure if it was a distraction while another force readied to attack the glaring weak point that was our supply train. I sent Adjutant instead, but by the time he arrived the fae had disappeared and left only charred corpses behind. They hit our scouts twice more that day, and though I was furious I eventually pulled back them back closer to our armies.

The Twelfth had already lost two hundred scouts to the mess, and the Fourth half that. Almost as much as the total casualties we'd incurred taking the fortress, without a single scalp to show for it. Ranker wasn't a Marshal for nothing, though. That night she cooked up a few surprises for the enemy. Half past Midnight Bell the sound of buried demolition charges resounded, catching the enemy sneaking around our back by surprise. The sappers waiting on the fae quickly found themselves outmatched, but they'd not been meant to win that fight: the Watch sallied out in full to hit the fae, carving out a few hundred corpses before they managed to flee. There was a sense of relief in the camps after that when the fae didn't dare to continue the harassment that rose my wariness. Ranker's too, as it happened. They struck again at dawn, while the soldiers were still half-asleep, but at the Marshal's suggestion we'd filled the supply wagon with soldiers and when the five hundred fae recklessly going for the carts arrived they were greeted by a steady crossbow volley. This time we managed to take prisoners, and the interrogations that followed were... illuminating.

We'd crossed the domains of two nobles already in our march, both of them gone to war with the host of Summer. Warned ahead of our arrival by the messengers of the Count of Olden Oak, the skeleton garrisons left behind had followed at a distance while sending runners ahead for reinforcements. The garrisons of all the surrounding demesnes had gathered under the Lady of the Verdant Orchard, four thousand in full, and taken to delaying and harassing us until a larger army could be assembled to wipe us out. Word had been sent to the heart of Summer, Aine, and to the Queen herself. What would come of it our prisoners had no idea, but I didn't want to stick around to find out. If the Queen of Summer took the field we were fucked beyond Lower Miezán's ability to express. With a better idea of what was on the other side, the decision was made to pick up the pace. As the prisoners had said, the fortress of the Count of Golden Harvest was empty of all life. It broke my heart to leave the place unlooted, but I didn't have the men or time to spare for it. It was a calculated

risk to keep marching past nightfall on the fifth night and it paid off: the fae raiders stripped another hundred men off our skin, but we managed to reach the edge of Princess Sulia's domain.

We fortified the camps, for that last night, and heavy but rotating watches allowed the soldiers to rest up before the last day and the battle I could feel in my bones was coming. Following that iron spike in the back of my head, I led the host to a wide grass plain by midmorning. This, I knew instinctively was where I could open the gate out. I took my time surveying the grounds. To the north the road continued across the plain, but our surroundings were not so uncluttered. To the west hills rose, low and round in the beginning but growing too steep to march through the deeper they went. To the east a sunny forest sprawled out for miles, the trees thick enough one could easily hide an army in there. It felt like a trap, though one whose jaws had yet to close. Last time we'd needed six hours – a bell and a half – to get the army through the gate. Which meant we had to hold this plain for at least six hours in the face of whatever came knocking. Ranker and Duchess Kegan came to join me as our armies spread across the span of grass, the three of us silent for a while before I spoke up.

"Defensive positions," I said. "When Summer comes knocking, I want them to be warmly received."

"Good grounds, for a battle," Ranker murmured. "If all you've promised comes to pass."

"Let's hope it does," I replied. "You'll be a very farsighted corpse by sundown if it doesn't."

"The sole saving grace of this affair," Kegan said.

I couldn't help but snort, but the amusement left me quickly. This was it. The day that decided whether I'd wrecked my chances at quelling the mess in Callow or not. *Let's find out which of our traps has the sharpest teeth, Princess of High Noon.*

Two hours later I opened the gate and we both rolled the dice.

## **Interlude: Commanders**

*"When historians try to pin down Foundling's methods they point to the Battle of the Camps or the Princes' Graveyard, but those came later. After she'd learned her trade. If you want to understand how she operated, look to the Battle of Four Armies and One – from the beginning to the end, she was playing an entirely different game from every other commander on the field."*  
– Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper of the Red Shields

Nauk of the Waxing Moons was having an interesting day. He'd been woken up before dawn when the watch officers had been forced to break up a brawl between legionaries of the Fifteenth and the Twelfth: the enmity between Afolabi and the Boss had trickled down, and no one who'd been through Marchford and Liesse was inclined to leave any teeth in a mouth that talked shit about Catherine Foundling. The poor fuckers were lucky they'd not run into the Gallowborne when flapping their mouths: that grim collection of paleskins drew steel over things like that and didn't sheathe until the blade was red. The legate had been in a mood when he'd stepped to the scene, but Hakram already had it in hand. The men from the Twelfth were handed to their officers for discipline – and with Marshal Ranker looking over Afolabi's back no one was under the illusions they'd get off lightly – while his boys were dragged back into their part of the camp. Fighting among legionaries when in hostile territory drew sharper sanctions than just brawling: it would be a hard flogging for them. When Deadhand had said their punishment would be delayed until the return to Creation they'd smirked, but that had disappeared real quick when Hakram had added that to even it out he'd deliver the flogging himself.

Nauk fancied that the memory of his old friend stomping a fae noble by swinging a horse one-handed would scare them into acting like proper fucking legionaries for a few weeks at least.

"She made another enemy," the legate grunted as he watched the last of them leave.

"He's Soninke old blood," Deadhand replied. "Was never going to be a friend. He's more useful as an example regardless."

The good thing about Hakram was that he didn't believe in kissing ass. Never had. If he said the Boss' decision to send a godsdamned general of Praes out of the room to clean her pipe like a misbehaving child had some sense to it, it meant he believed it. He wouldn't have been afraid to disagree openly if he did – not with only Nauk around to hear, anyway. The legate spat to the side.

"If you say so," he said. "The Wallerspawns weren't moved, by my reckoning."

The other orc's brow rose. Nauk scoffed.

"She speaks with a Laure accent, Hakram," he said. "She's as much one of them as I am."

"She'll still smack you in the mouth if she hears you say that word," he replied. "We have larger scores to settle than old grudges like that one. They're our allies, at least for now."

Easy for Deadhand to say. *His* grandfather hadn't died taking a run at the Wall. The old scrapper had been too deep in the Red Rage to retreat when the Watch came out in force, and ended up with his head on a spike for it. It might still be there for all he knew.

"Deoraithe, then," Nauk conceded in a grumble.

"Kegan's hard iron, I'll give you that," Hakram conceded in Kharsum. "But she was watching, and she'll remember next time she feels like pushing."

"Politics," Nauk snorted. "Glad you're the luckless bastard stuck dealing with those."

"Not that different from College alliances, when it gets down to it," Deadhand replied, turning to gaze out into the night. "Everybody wants something."

The legate grunted, conveying his general fucking distaste for Wasteland schemery.

"Grab what sleep you have left," Hakram finally said. "Tomorrow's a red day if there ever was one."

Nauk of the Waxing Moons grinned, baring ivory chops to the night.

"Looking forward to it," he said.

They got to the place by midmorning, and even as the rest of the armies dug in Nauk pawned off his duties to Commander Jwahir to study the grounds at his leisure. The Taghreb woman was a better hand at organizing, anyway. He'd picked her as his second for that very reason when he'd lost his brother so fucking senselessly at Three Hills. The same eerie road they'd used to get here continued to the north, supposedly reaching Aine and the seat of the Summer Court eventually. How long it would take to get there, no one had any idea. Apparently time was subjective in Arcadia, which sounded like the kind of shit the warlock's get babbled about after a few cups. Not close enough for whatever was in there to reinforce the opposition in time, which was the important part anyway. There was no sign of the enemy for now, and they'd checked. The woods to the east were empty, and thick enough besides you couldn't march in proper ranks through them. The hills to the west couldn't be marched through from the other side, as far as the goblins could tell, but that meant fuck all when the opposition had wings. If Nauk was in a betting mood, he'd bet on Summer placing a nasty surprise in there to flank them where the lines were engaged.

At least this would be a defensive engagement. The kind of fight most of their host were best at. Wallerspaw liked to let the



enemy come to them and they were heavy on bowmen besides, while Marshal Ranker's gang of cutthroats had the sharpest sappers in all the Legions. As for General Afolabi's Twelfth, their cognomen was *Holdfast*. They'd stopped a Callowan force twice their size from making it to the Siege of Summerholm, during the Conquest, by digging in and letting them die on their palisades. After losing a full kabili at the onset of the Liesse Rebellion and needing the Fifteenth to bail them out of the mess in Summerholm, those boys and girls would be eager to wipe off the black marks from their record. They'd fight with fire in their bellies no matter what came calling. The absence of reliable information about what *that* would be had been a stone in the large orc's boot for this entire expedition. Apparently there was going to be some kind of princess, but what the Hells did that mean? The legate was more interested in numbers and those were still anyone's guess. The almost thirty thousand assembled here were nothing to fuck with lightly, and Nauk would bet on them to handle up to twenty-five thousand Summer screamers no matter what nobles backed them.

Thirty thousand would be dicey, though. More than that and it was going to get bloody, and not in the way the legate enjoyed. The Fifteenth had been outnumbered before, at Three Hills, and outclassed at Marchford. But never both. Even the Boss would have a hard time pulling a win from that mess if it came down to it. *Speaking of*. Pretending he couldn't see Jwahir looking for him with her report-face, Nauk legged it as discreetly as an orc his size could. Catherine was sitting on one of the decadent cushioned chairs they'd looted back at the fortress, lounging like a lazy cat with that dragonbone pipe of hers. Nauk occasionally wondered if she knew what even just this much dragonbone was worth: you could buy a mansion in one of the better parts of Ater for the gold it would earn at an auction. She blew out a stream of smoke as he rested his elbows on the back of her chair, the wooden frame groaning in protest.

"Nauk," she greeted him.

She spoke his name the way it would be spoken in Kharsum. It was always eerie, when she used the tongue of his people. She had a flawless heartlands accent without having ever stepped a foot there – Name fuckery struck him as the guilty party there. The legate could the side of her face well, from this close. Sharp and high cheekbones that had gotten even sharper since she'd gone into Arcadia to exact her share of hide from Winter, tan skin had had gotten ever darker with all the marching in the sun they'd been doing of late. Whether she was pretty by human standards he had no idea – she certainly had her fair share of people panting after her, though she'd ever only given Kilian the doe eyes. Nauk knew better than to ask how that had turned out. It hadn't escaped anyone's attention that the two of them had been keeping

separate beds for months and that they rarely spoke directly to one another anymore.

"Cat," he growled back.

"Shouldn't you be preparing your men?"

The tone was casual, but he knew to take it seriously anyway. The Boss was nowhere as much of a hardass as Juniper, but she liked to run a tidy crew. Even those who'd been with her since Rat Company were expected to pull their weight.

"Jwahir has it in hand," he said. "I'll look it over later. There a reason you haven't made the portal?"

"I expect that they'll appear not long after I do," she replied, amused for some reason beyond him. "Better we dig in first."

"Gonna be a rough one, this," Nauk grunted. "Might take us more than a bell and a half to retreat if we're under fire the whole time. And the last ones to leave will be given a bitch of a fight."

He'd been standing close to her long enough to start feeling the cold now. Whatever she'd done in Winter it had changed her. Worse temper, though she'd never exactly been a delicate flower, and nowadays wherever she stood was always a mite frosty. Nauk didn't mind. It reminded him of home, of the Steppes in spring just after the snows melted. From his height he could see the corner of her mouth twitch. The blade-smile. Someone always ended up bleeding out on the ground before too long whenever she made it.

"Princess Sulia will be in command, on the other side," Cat said. "She was described to me once as having a "beautifully simplistic view of things"."

"Don't need to get fancy when you can torch everything all the time," Nauk said, admiration and disgruntlement warring for his tone.

"Dealing with someone like that is a lot like dealing with a hero," the Boss mused. "She'll enter the field thinking she knows the story ahead of her, because that's all she's ever known."

"I'm guessing that's not a nice story, for us," Nauk said.

"It's a story about invaders taking a beating as they try to retreat," she said. "Most likely capped with a last stand at the gate to cover the last of us fleeing."

"We taking the rearguard, then?" the legate asked.

Would be a fight to remember, that was for sure. He wasn't fond of the notion of sacrificing his jesha to cover other Legions and

Waller— *Deoraithe*, better he use that even in his mind, he wouldn't put it above her to be able to smell shit like this — but if that was what was needed to win the war he'd grind his fangs and take the reaming.

"Oh Gods no," Catherine laughed quietly. "Summer's going into this with the perception that our strategy is all about limiting losses. I didn't come here to flee limping, Nauk. I've come for blood."

Nauk felt his shoulders loosen and chuckled. Not because of the words, though they'd been reassuring enough, but because of the tone. *Quiet*. Catherine Foundling was always at her most dangerous, when she got quiet. Time to make that known across two worlds, he figured.

—

"The girl was right," Duchess Kegan said.

Adair shifted on his feet, watching the same sight she was. Countess Foundling had opened her gate but a half-hour ago, not long after the goblin had finished her preparations, and already the host of Summer was arriving. They were coming from the north down the road, as had been anticipated, but Kegan doubted that was the only direction they would strike from. This Princess Sulia had proved competent enough to annex most of southern Callow: she'd have more subtlety to her intent than a mere battering ram.

"About the timing only. She was wrong about the numbers," Adair said softly. "My men say over fifty thousand."

The ruler of Daoine closed her eyes, allowing herself the weakness only because no one but her old friend was close enough to see it. More than fifty thousand. They could barely afford to fight half that.

"Summer must have mobilized its full might to crush us," she finally said. "There cannot be anything but sentinels left in Creation."

"The Fifteenth and the Knightsbane's command were on the move due south when we crossed the gate," Adair noted. "She might have meant for all of us to serve as bait while they take back Dormer and Holden."

"Neither force is large enough to hold the cities, if Summer attacks afterwards," Kegan said, frowning.

"She is young," Adair shrugged. "And yet to be defeated. That breeds arrogance."

"She is not a fool," the duchess murmured. "Let us be careful to avoid the mistake of taking her for one. It would be a costly misstep to make."

And oh, what delicate dance it had been to deal with that terrifying child. Where the Carrion Lord had dug up this monster she did not know, for surely the stories about her being an Laurean orphan were a smokescreen for the truth. Obscure Imperial wards did not go on to win the kind of battles Catherine Foundling had, not after *two* years. Twice heroes had died at the girl's hand, devils and demons scattered by mortal men under her command, a resurrection forcefully snatched out of the hands of a descending Hashmallim. These were the signs of a legend in the making. If the Black Knight had ever been linked to one of the People, Kegan would have believed Foundling to be a child of his own blood raised in obscurity to avoid the knives of the High Lords. As this was not the case, she must have been found young and trained away from prying eyes to be unleashed as a weapon to suppress future Callowan rebellions. The villain's foresight never ceased to chill her blood, schemes decades in the making coming to fruit at precisely the right time.

Still, it seemed his weapon had gone slightly astray. She was on her way to becoming a power in her own right, and that meant she could be negotiated with. Kegan had early understood the same truth that Ranker – that rotten old bitch – clearly did: to prevent Foundling from realizing the strength of her position, the stick had to be used with only a rare carrot dangled. It was a careful balance to strike, given what they were dealing with. The Duchess of Daoine still felt her blood run cold when she remembered that slip of a girl glancing at a general of Praes, casually mentioning she could Speak to him if she wished. The implied threat had been lost on no one at that table. *Cross me and I will take away your free will, easy as snapping my fingers.* Gods, barely eighteen and she could already use her Name to impose her will on others. Not even the Carrion Lord had been this precocious and Kegan knew the terror of the man better than most. Her own aunt had been left an arrow-filled corpse in her own fortress when the Duni was still but a Squire, swatted down like a fly in inside of the most heavily defended fortresses on Calernia. Praes was not to be trifled with, not without very good reason.

The gruesome mantle of the Calamities was being passed to fresh Named, and though yet young these monsters would grow as dangerous as the old ones.

Adair stirred again and it claimed Kegan's attention. She followed his eyes and saw the host of the fae spreading across the plain, facing the fortifications. Around sixty thousand she counted, revising upwards the earlier assessment. There were knights on winged horses that the duchess anticipated to be

trouble even if they could not use sorcery, which seemed unlikely.

"The hills," Adair murmured.

There was, Kegan saw, a single person there. In a hooded cloak, leaning back against the slope as they sharpened a sword with a whetstone. At this distance, not even the Watch could get much more from eyesight. Whoever they were, they did not seem inclined to move from the height. A *chronicler*? Kegan wondered. It seemed odd for a scholar to be armed, or be here at all. She was debating sending scouts to make inquiries when movement emerged at the head of the army of Summer. Two silhouettes, both mounted. One pale and dark-haired with a perfect beard, wearing robes of woven flame and sunlight. A sword rested at his hip, no other weapon visible. The other was taller and there was no doubt about her identity: the Princess of High Noon was as the tales told, hair like fire and terrible to behold. Swirls of heat marred the air wherever she moved. The Princess Sulia was bearing a banner of truce, and rode halfway between the two awaiting armies before slamming the wooden shaft into the ground. Foundling's right hand found them not long after, the imposingly tall orc with the necromantic abomination at his wrist. He nodded politely, and etiquette dictated Kegan return the same. She did so grudgingly.

"Lady Foundling invites you to join the party that will meet with Summer," he said.

"Then I will do so," Kegan replied flatly. "This is more than we bargained for."

"It always is," the Adjutant smiled, sinisterly baring teeth. "You've seen the person in the hills?"

"We have," Kegan replied.

"She instructs they're to be left alone," the orc said.

"Why?" Kegan frowned.

"The exact words were "if that's who I think it is, we *really* don't want to get in her way"."

"Quaint," the duchess sneered, not allowing the uneasiness she felt to show.

An ally of Foundling's? No, it couldn't be. All the Named that followed her were accounted for. And if it was a Winter fae the army of Summer would have moved to attack them. It could not be the Wild Hunt, since this was not the seasons for it – only in Spring and Autumn did these entities come into being. Too many factors were unknown to her on this battlefield and Kegan did not like it in the slightest. She joined the rest of the *diplomats*

regardless. The Countess herself and Ranker were all of it: since the other side had not cluttered the grounds, there was no need for them to do so. The goblin's face was a mask, but the girl herself seemed remarkably at ease. Like they weren't walking to treat with demigods in the fullness of their power. *Monster*, Kegan thought. Only a monster would be half-smiling as they approached the fae.

"Princess Sulia, I presume?" Foundling said.

"Duchess of Moonless Nights," the creature replied.

It hurt to look at her for too long, Kegan found. Like staring into the sun.

"Word *does* spread fast," Foundling drawled, tone amused. "Who's the man with the sharp beard?"

"I am the Prince of Deep Drought," the fae said, and though his face was beautiful the hatred turned it ugly. "We finally meet, pawn of Winter."

The girl clucked her tongue.

"I'm at least a rook, really," she said. "There's no need to be insulting."

Was she really unaware that every time she spoke the fae shivered with the urge to kill her? Kegan wondered with dismay. Why had she even come to treat if she was only going to taunt them?

"You wanted to talk," Ranker interrupted.

It was adding insult to injury for Kegan to ever have to feel *thankful* towards the likes of that withered old prune.

"Surrender," Princess Sulia ordered, and there was a weight to the tone that almost made Kegan want to kneel. "All of you may still swear yourselves to Summer. Only the broken thing wearing Winter's seal needs to die today."

"It's always refreshing to meet someone who's worse at diplomacy than I am," Foundling noted, seemingly impressed.

The Duchess of Daoine gritted her teeth. Was the girl still pretending she'd not carefully used Kegan's enmity with Ranker to get her way more often than not, baiting them to argument only to come in as a "mediator" at the last moment? Not even the Carrion Lord was this smug a manipulator – the Knight had the decency not to pretend he was doing anything but taking what he wanted from you. The Princess of High Noon ignored the Named, instead turning her eyes to the sole goblin.

"You need not die pointlessly, mortal," she said. "The laws of Summer will shield you after you swear allegiance."

The goblin's burned hand clutched tight until her sharp nails drew blood on her own palm. She met the fae's eyes with a grin full of fine fangs.

"I am a Marshal of the Legions of Terror, you pretentious tart," she said. "I live by only one law: *one sin, one grace*. You want my surrender? Come and take it."

The fae's eyes turned to Kegan, and she'd steeled herself. She felt what Ranker must have, the crushing weight on her shoulders that wasn't even an exertion of power – the Princess of High Noon did this just by sparing a mortal a sliver of her attention.

"I am a Duchess of Daoine," Kegan replied coldly. "I answer to neither god nor men, much less the likes of *you*."

"Quarter will not be offered twice," the Prince of Deep Drought said, tone sad. "It is not yet too late."

"Speaking of that," Foundling said, popping her neck with a gruesome cracking sound. "If you want to avoid me beating you like a rented mule it's not too late to make peace. I'll need hostages and reparations, of course, but you can still get away with losing only a hand."

*We are going to die*, Kegan realized with crystal-clear clarity. *We are going to die because whatever the Carrion Lord did to teach this child broke her mind.*

"Did you think we wouldn't notice the Prince of Nightfall's stench wafting from the woods?" the Prince of Deep Drought mocked. "He only had time to bring a third of Winter with him. You are outnumbered still."

The duchess glanced east, where there was still no sign of anything in the woods. Had the fae been tricked, or had the scouts? There was a game at play here and she knew neither the rules nor the players.

"I'm trying to be merciful here," Foundling said, and the lie was so insultingly blatant Kegan almost cringed. "Are you really going to spit on my goodwill?"

The Princess of High Noon did and the ground where she'd spat caught fire.

"Ah well, I tried," Foundling grinned, and it was an unpleasant thing to watch. "See you soon."

The fae held to the terms of the truce, the enemy army not beginning to move before the three of them had returned to the fold. A part of Ranker was sharply curious about whether they were respecting truce terms as they were held in Calernia or whether the concept of truce as known to Calernia had initially come from Arcadia, which was widely held to have existed before Creation itself. A matter for another time. She'd slip the question in her correspondence with Tikoloshe, the staggeringly ancient incubus might have an inkling. The Marshal had planned the defences of the allied armies without the knowledge of there being reinforcements from Winter inbound, if there truly were reinforcements inbound. She'd had eyes on Foundling's little raider ever since he'd first come to Denier, and though her scouts had lost track of him after the fortress her people had noticed the large amount of mages who'd disappeared with him. Was that the Squire's plan? Using the Count of Olden Oak and some unknown ritual to pretend Winter had sent troops, faking the presence of some powerful Winter fae. Wekesa's son took orders from her, so he might have coughed out a few secrets before she set out on her journey north. That would be deep cunning and deep planning, however, and she'd not struck Ranker as that kind of villain so far.

If false, it was the kind of bluff that could easily be called. It might gain them some time, but not much and not enough to affect the outcome. The evacuation had already begun, with the supply – and loot – carts leaving first. The former Matron saw the logic in it. They'd have to be taken across eventually, and this kept as much military strength on the field as possible for as long as possible. The Deoraithe regulars were slated to go through next, with the rest of the order to be determined as the battle unfolded. Ranker had been watching the Squire's movements carefully since it had come out she had some scheme in play, but gotten little information for it. After the gate out was opened Foundling had some of her few remaining mages scry across, and established contact for a few moments before breaking off. Her own mages had been listening in, and no words or images had gone through. Ranker, she-who-has-the-bearing-of-one-of-high-rank in the stonetongue and one-meant-to-stand-above-others-mercilessly in matrontongue, had been through more red days than any other goblin alive. She'd been warring in the Eyries when the Calamities were still in their cradles, she'd killed her way through the civil war and the Conquest and a dozen minor actions besides.

For the first time in many years, though, she felt like she was walking in deepest dark. The Squire was mad, this was obvious. All Named were, the successful ones merely managed to make that madness methodical the way Amadeus and the Empress had. And even with those two, one could glimpse the cliff edge and the sharp drop that followed. Sadly, that meant Ranker genuinely could not tell whether Foundling has been taunting the fae



royalty because she was confident in victory or because she was too far gone to be able to conceptualize her own defeat. Even if this Prince of Deep Draught – and Gobbler take them all, weren't these titles even more pretentious than the ones Wastelanders jerked each other off with? – was correct and there were Winter fae in the woods, unless there were a great many more hiding than the twenty thousand implied this was still not a winning hand for the allied armies. The only visible unknown factor was that madwoman in the hills, and Ranker had needed no instructions from the Squire to steer clear of that. Putting aside that nothing good had ever come of an army picking a fight with a single mysterious stranger, Ranker had seen that ugly hooded cloak before.

There were some kinds of crazy not even goblins were willing to touch, and that one definitely qualified.

The Marshal's general staff gathered around her as the fae began their march, questions painted on their faces. Aabir, her Staff Tribune, took one look at her and grimaced. He'd known her for a long time, long enough to read the truth off her if she wasn't trying to lie.

"She still hasn't told us the plan," he said. "This is madness, ma'am. How can we be expected to fight when we don't know all the forces at work?"

"It makes sense, in a way," Kachera Tribune Saddler said more cautiously. "We do not know how well fae can scry in their own realm. We cannot leak a plan we are not aware of."

Ranker raised her black hand and was granted immediate silence.

"As as I see it, there are two options here," she said. "One, Black's Name rotted his mind and he went the way of the Old Tyrant, appointing a raging imbecile as his successor. If that's the case, even if we're not dead today we'll be in a few years. There's other wars around the corner."

Procer, she did not need to say. They all had the rank to be in the know.

"And two?" Saddled asked, eyes blinking sleepily.

He was getting old, wasn't he? And to think he was merely forty.

"Two, the Squire is the kind of brilliant that walks hand in hand with crazy and stupid," Ranker said. "I'm choosing to put my faith in Black. Make your own choices, but whatever they are get ready for a hard ride. The fae mean business – expect to have two sorcerers on par with the Wizard of the West pounding us."

Dangling a bit of hope, appealing on the worship of Amadeus that had become as much a part of the Legions as the singing and the drills and then an immediate threat to prepare for. It should be enough to keep their minds on the battle. Ranker wished she could be so easily distracted, but she was too old to fool herself. She climbed onto the platform she'd had raised to get a decent view of the battle, her bones protesting the indignity before she settled on a cushion. At her sides messengers, mages able to scry and signal officers stood ready for orders. Afolabi would have a similar set up on his side of the fortifications, and he was enough of a professional his grudge against Foundling would be put aside for the battle. *You poor fool*, she thought. *You should be more worried about her grudge against you. The girl's Callowan, they gnaw on those like bones.* She dismissed the thought and turned her eyes to the battle, to Summer on the march. Ranker had prepared the plain for a hard battle, and today she would get to see how fae died.

The allied camp consisted of two ringed wooden palisades, with the gate in the centre. There was an avenue with smaller movable barricades going straight through, punctuated with two sets of rough but solid wooden gates. Ahead of the first palisade she'd had her sappers dig a trench ten feet deep with spikes at the bottom, which had unfortunately limited how much work she'd been able to order on the plain. There were weight-triggered demolition charges buried according to the Third Delay Pattern she had herself designed during the civil war, but she didn't expect to see much death from those. The lily field was what would blood them, closer to the trench. An array of pits three feet deep with a sharpened stake at the bottom, hidden under branches and dead grass. The prince and princess had retreated into their ranks for the offensive, warier than the Marshal would have thought. The chit in the south must have bled them at some point for them to be this careful. Might yet work out to her advantage, Ranker decided. The first line was the same infantry they'd seen earlier in their expedition through Summer, and it kept advancing until across seven points in that line demolition charges blew.

The spray of blood and flesh had long ceased being exciting and turned into cold mathematics, coin put into tools that killed men but could have been spent otherwise. The assessments in her unspoken records shifted with every battle. Though the damages had been minimal, the enemy could only guess at the concentration of charges and it stopped them from advancing. Right out of the farthest bow range they'd shown at the fortress, as she had meant them to. The wings of the three first ranks of the fae lit up and Ranker glanced away, their trajectory already happening in her mind. The winged cavalry in the back wasn't moving, as she'd guessed it would not. The Watch was being kept in reserve to deal with them, but it seemed that her assessment that the knights would only strike after the fight was engaged was correct. Ahead

of her agonized cries sounded, so Ranker deigned return her attention closer to camp. Two for two, it seemed. The Princess of High Noon had only figured that there would be demolition charges ahead of the trench, and so sent a first wave to clear them and gain a foothold. Instead they'd gone straight into the lily field and were bleeding out like stuck pigs with the sappers on the outer wall tossed sharpeners to clear out those who'd landed on solid ground.

Now the fight began, as the second wave that had taken flight moments after the first landed in the shreds of meat and bone that were their comrades. The lily patches had been revealed, so they managed an actual landing this time. If Princess Sulia had meant for them to then attack the walls Ranker would have called her a fool, since they could have directly assaulted the walls. But that wasn't the intent at all, was it? The third wave, right behind the second, was the one to assault. The second was bringing up bows, finally in range to use those devastating fire arrows that had harassed the allied camps on the march here. The Legions fired their crossbows straight into the bowmen in good order, while the Deoraithe standing between the first and second wall sent a volley into the sky at the fae headed for the wall. A costly trade off, Ranker saw. Legion crossbowmen took their toll but the enemy fired back and fires bloomed across the palisade, hurriedly put off with sand and dirt. There were damned holes in the outer wall, and when the enemy infantry came marching in they would have breaches ready for them. As for the bloody useless Deoraithe, they barely killed a hundred. Shooting fae in the sky was like trying to shoot a fish in the ocean.

The melee at the outer palisade began in earnest, but Ranker wasn't worried about that. The legionaries would hold steady against numbers that low. The other waves in flight were more worrying, one to back the bowmen and the other the vanguard. But most worrying of all was the dozen fae that rode out of the ranks in a scattered line and raised their hands. A rolling wave of flame swept across the plain and the Marshal's dead hand twitched. One after another, her charges blew from the sorcerous heat. A field full of potholes but clear of dangers ahead of them, the fae infantry resumed their advance. The Marshal felt a grudging sliver of respect for the Princess that was her opponent. She'd been willing to send a few thousand into the grinder just to keep the enemy busy while she prepared a clear way forward for the rest. That was the kind of decisiveness that won battles. Not, however, if she could help it. Ranker gestured for one of her mages to come closer.

"All mage lines," she said. "Wave fireballs to knock the fae out of the sky before they land on the outer palisade. Steady, constant."

The order went across smoothly and the broad balls of flame that bloomed got the situation under control. Trying to kill Summer fae with fire was like trying to drown a salmon, but the impact was enough knock them down. Those that try to fly above instead ate arrows as the Deoraithe finally began pulling their weight. Outer palisade was in hand, for now, but the fae army was hungrily devouring the distance as it charged forward. That was, Ranker saw, when Winter struck. The darker half of the Fair Folk did not come announced. It moved in silence, a tidal wave of warriors adorned with dead wood and black stone that struck the eastern Summer flank like a snake. At their head a one-eyed man rode a horse of shadows, the spear in his hand glinting of murder. They were impressive to watch, but the Marshal did not care how fucking impressive they were. She watched for numbers, and found only the twenty thousand the Prince of Deep Drought had sneered at. The same numbers pulled off the flank of Summer in good order, slowing the assault some but not by enough. If these were all the cards Foundling had to play, the battle was a loss slowly crawling to them.

The wave of infantry hit the outer palisade and the legionaries buckled. Deoraithe reinforced them, but there was only so much room and the fae *kept coming*. Ranker could see the rest of the battle play out in her mind. They'd hold, at least until Winter began to break. Then the pressure would strengthen and they'd lose the outer palisade. And then inch by inch they would die, painting the ground of Arcadia red. Summer would lose half its army, she thought. But it would win, and only wisps of the army that had come into Arcadia would escape through the gate.

"Marshal," her Senior Mage's voice whispered urgently.

She'd not heard him coming to her side, deep in thought as she had been.

"I'm listening," she said.

"Lady Squire's mages scryed across the gate again," he said.

Ranker licked her teeth.

"Same as last time?" she asked.

"Just a contact, then nothing," he agreed, then flinched and turned west.

The madwoman was still sitting on her perch, the former Matron saw. No, what had drawn her officer's attention was the gate that had just opened in front of the hills.

"Kolo, what is that?" she said.

"A gate, Marshal," the Senior Mage replied.

"I can see that," the goblin snarled. "Where is it from?"

"Creation," he whispered.

There was a sound then, that Ranker had not heard in twenty years. A horn, but not the large horns the Legion used. The kind of blowing horn that someone could carry in hand. Once, twice, thrice the call went out. *All knights charge*, it meant. That call had not shuddered across a battlefield since the Fields of Streges, and the Marshal was not ashamed to admit she felt the age-old shiver when the knights of Callow charged through the gate, killing lances down as they whistled through the air. The banner she did not recognize, a bell of bronze with a jagged crack through it set on black. Three thousand of the finest cavalry Calernia had ever seen ploughed into the western flank of Summer and Ranker began laughing.

"Oh, you conniving bitch," she said breathlessly. "You never intended for us to evacuate, did you?"

Eyes bright, one of the only three Marshals of Praes rose to her feet.

"Orders," she said, facing her mages. "My dears, do I have orders."

## Chapter 28: Gambits

*"I've yet to encounter a situation that couldn't be improved by a copious amount of lies and body doubles."*

– Dread Emperor Traitorous

Well, it'd taken two years and some change but I was finally on the right side of a cavalry charge. And all it had cost me to get there was a lot of murdering, and that one spot of high treason.

The thoughts were flippant, but the sight before me killed the urge to continue in that vein. Three thousand knights of Callow were breaking through the western flank of the fae, taking death with them wherever they went as they carried the banner I'd named on a spur. I'd read about the chivalric orders, the men and women who had once been the pride of the Kingdom, and I thought I'd understood the kind of weight they could bring to bear. I'd been very, very wrong about that. Two thousand fae died in the blink of an eye, pierced by lances and trampled by destriers. It wasn't that the knights were gifted with eldritch power, not like the Watch. They were mortals through and through, though trained in war since they could walk. Neither were they like the paladins of the Order of the White Hand, sworn to fight Evil and made able to call on lesser miracles for it. Or so the old books said, anyway. The Order had been long buried by the time I was born, Black destroying it in an exceedingly thorough manner so that no hero

would ever rise from their scattered ranks. No lost daughter of the White Hand would ever claim an old birth right and bring rebellion to Callow.

No, they were just Callowans. I watched a gout of flame splash against the breastplate of a long-haired woman and leave it untouched. Just Callowans, but no babes in the woods for it. The knights of Callow had not been forged by the old wars with the Principate, though enough of those were fought. No, they were the answer of the Kingdom to the sorceries of the Wasteland. There was a reason a Warlock could not simply wave his hand and burn a thousand of them to ashes. *Clad in steel and prayer*, the old song went. Hymns from the House of Light were carved into their armaments, mere grooves in steel until sorcery touched them. Then they glimmered, and magic slid like droplets off a duck's back. It was not immunity: they could still be harmed through the protection, often had been, but it was telling that when Black had thought to break them he had turned to orcs and pikes instead of whatever madness Warlock could have unleashed. In front of goblin steel, the armaments of the knights were armour like any other. There was a lesson in there. The chivalric orders had been founded to check a threat, and when the nature of that threat changed they were caught flatfooted and destroyed.

Today, though? I'd found them an enemy that could not, *would* not change.

"Captain Firasah," I said, and the mage at my side stiffened. "Word from the other side?"

"She has gone through, ma'am," the one-eyed Taghreb replied.

Firasah had been one of the mage officer who'd tried to scry the Summer forces when the Fifteenth had still been in Summerholm. She was one of the lucky ones – she'd excised her eye before the burns from the backlash could spread across half her face. Not all the mages had been so fortunate. She'd hesitated when I'd told her we would be scrying Winter while on the march, but as I'd thought my title shielded the mages from the frozen fury that had poured through the connection. It had done little to soothe the Prince of Nightfall's temper, when I'd found him, but the bait of Summer crippled I had dangled had been too tempting for him to resist. The lateness of the arrangement had limited what forces he could bring, though, more than I would have wished. Another ten thousand fae would have made it all much easier. He'd taken another royal with him along for the ride: the Princess of Silent Depths. They'd asked for prizes and to know my plans.

Naturally, I'd lied.

"Good," I replied quietly, closing my eyes.

I'd begun this battle thinking I was aware of every string being pulled. Winter was out for blood and plunder, unquenchable hunger in their bellies. Kegan and Ranker wanted to leave Arcadia as soon as possible, convinced this fight could only be measured in shades of defeat. And Summer? Summer wanted to crush me. To turn the quibbling mortals who'd dared step foot in their domain to ashes. I'd understood that before the other two commanders in my army, because I had an advantage they didn't. I still remembered that hard-bitten hatred I'd felt after crossing the gate, when I'd gazed upon the moonlit field. It didn't matter, whether or not it made tactical sense for the Princess of High Noon to withdraw from Creation to assail us. She *had* to. It was in her nature. I was of Winter, and Summer could never shy from a challenge as brazen as the one I'd issued. This battle had always been a certainty. It was a matter, then, of stacking the odds in my favour. I needed a story, or at least an engagement that had the shape of one. A larger Summer force blundering into a trap had served that purpose, leaving me only with the need to, well, make an actual trap.

So I'd spared the Count of Olden Oak, though through his actions he had earned an ugly death at my hands one day. Because a fae of count rank could *open gates*. Not gates like mine, sadly, but their ability to sort of step through the boundary protecting Creation could be extended to a group. Like half of Robber's cohort, along with enough mages to keep the Count of Olden Oak suppressed by layered wards. Iron knives had to be taken to him to convince him of making the gate, sadly, since the flame of Summer inside him made Speaking ineffective. Robber had been able to take care of it. He'd gleefully informed me that the College had an entire week of classes dedicated to the subject, along with the question of 'how much torture is too much torture'. The answer was apparently more complicated than I'd assumed. The goblin's assertion that it was an old cadet favourite along with the class about why 'vast and terrible powers' were not a valid reason to lack a supply train, I chose not to think too much about.

When back in Creation, his orders were to scry Juniper in a hurry. Depending on where the Fifteenth was relative to where he emerged with the Count, there could be two options. The first was that the legion would be too far too join up in time for the battle, in which case he was to simply call for the knights to ride in haste ahead of the infantry. The other was to bring all he could across and smash the fae flank according to the directions I gave him. I'd confirmed, before the beginning of the fight, that the second situation had come to unfold. On the other side of the portal that had just opened the entire Fifteenth was arrayed, and by now they would have begun to cross. So would Apprentice and Archer: the person who'd been on the other side of the scrying I'd arranged the moment I opened the gate was Masego, Captain Firasah was certain of it. Good. Then I could proceed

according to what I'd meant this fight to be instead of a lesser scenario. Wiping out Summer in full here would be too much to hope for, I was aware. We were too deep in their territory for that. But if I played my cards right, I might just get what I needed to fight this war on my terms.

The thing was, when I'd left Marchford I'd been thinking of taking a force through Arcadia as a risky gamble that would allow me to steal a march on the Diabolist. After all, everybody knew fae were stronger in Arcadia. Able to use more of their power. The assumption of every commander in this war had been that I would try to fight them in Creation, where the grounds were more to my advantage. But were they really? The thought had been in the back of my mind since Laure. I could concentrate the Legions and the army of Daoine in the south and try to smash the Summer Court there, but that would be *costly*. We'd lose thousands in that fight, and thousands more would be too wounded to be of any use when I put down Akua. If I got Winter involved, that meant letting rapacious fae loose in Callow under the command of an entity I'd have a hard time handling, much less killing if it came to that. And even if I won, then what? Maybe we chewed half their number before they retreated having cost us twice that much, and then they would just pop out from somewhere else. The Fifteenth and whoever else I dragged with me were perhaps the most mobile force on Calernia at the moment, but the fae had the same advantage and they were better at using it.

So if I didn't want them to waltz past my army and burn Callow from the Waning Woods to the Silver Lake, I needed to dictate where they had to go. The way Juniper had done to me in our first war games, giving me her flag so she could be certain where I'd be instead of waiting out the days to a draw. The first place and moment I knew they'd be for sure? Here. Today. I had to bleed them hard here, because Arcadia was the only place where I could make their numbers meaningless. As long as I had the story on my side today, I could butcher them in droves in a way I simply couldn't in Creation without losing thousands myself. I couldn't end them here, that was true. There would be a second battle, and to be able to dictate when and where that one happened I was going to have to get a little... reckless. This was the only chance I'd get, which meant we were returning to the old standard of all or nothing. I'd never lost that bet before, and I didn't intend on starting today.

Most everything had been going the way I wanted it to, which was why I'd been less than surprised when Ranger had shown up. There was no doubt it was her: I knew that cloak for my Name dreams. I'd swiftly given orders to not provoke her in the slightest – as I understood it she refrained from killing Praesi for sport more out of courtesy for Black than any real fondness, and that might go out the window the moment someone irritated her. I'd thought she might be here for the Prince of Nightfall, to collect a



second eye for her jewellery, but she'd not stirred when he'd come out. And she'd made no move against Princess Sulia, which had been my other guess. That was... not good. Were it someone else I would have presumed she was waiting for the fae to tire themselves out against each other before sweeping in, but that went against my understanding of Ranger. If she was here for a fight, she'd wanted whoever she was fighting at their peak. The longer she refrained from getting involved the more nervous I got, but what the Hells could I do about it? I was pretty sure I could take Archer, if I needed to, but the other Named had been pretty frank about the kind of margin her teacher outclassed her by.

That had pretty blatant implications about how that fight would go if I picked it, which I *really* didn't want to.

I opened my eyes and watched the battle. I still had cards to play, more than the opposition probably thought, but if I wanted to make this a win I'd have pick the right moment. To the east, Summer and Winter clashed. The centre of Winter's line was made up of a chunk of five thousand of my old buddies the deadwood soldiers, and they were chewing up the Summer regulars real bad. The flanks, though, were made up of the same rabbled that had assaulted Marchford – and they were taking a bloody beating. The tricks that had worked on my legionaries left other fae indifferent, and unlike the Summer fae those twits didn't fight in a proper battle line. *Warriors against soldiers*, I thought. My 'allies' had to take out their heavies early when the left flank wavered, a thousand Riders of the Host on their murderous unicorns charging out of the woods to slam into the enemy and take off the pressure. The winged knights of Summer took flight, though, and with matching numbers on both sides there was only one way that scarp would go. The battle in the sky above them wasn't going beautifully either.

Princess Sulia and her easily offended patsy had lit up their wings and flown above to scrap with the Prince of Nightfall and the Princess of Silent Depths, and watching that go down made me want to wince. The Winter prince opened with filling the sky with a howling blizzard, which the Princess of High Noon promptly screamed out of existence. Just screamed. Not even fire or anything. That must have been embarrassing. Watching the Summer royalty fight was giving me a notion of what it must have been like watching Apprentice and I go all out. Sulia kept the Winter royals busy up close and personal while the Prince of Deep Drought lashed out with sorcery. The Princess of Silent Depths slowed them down some when she called on some kind of power whose weight could be felt even from where I stood, bringing down crushing pressure that dented the ground under them – pulping fae from both sides in the process – and nearly knocked the Summer pair out of the sky. Didn't last long, though, and Princess Sulia retaliated by hacking her arm off and smashing the Prince of

Nightfall's nose with it. I would have admired her style, if I wasn't next in line on her kill list.

It was unfolding like a lesson on why Winter got whipped whenever it came to a battle, and though they were holding for now – Silent Depths made herself a brand new arm out of ice and promptly tried to strangle the prince on the other side with it – that hourglass was going to run out eventually. Couldn't let that happen, much as I would have liked for the Prince of Nightfall to become an object lesson about why trying to use me was a bad idea. I still had a use for them.

The east was going more smoothly. Regulars of the Fifteenth were establishing a beachhead as they continued crossing, though it would take a while before there were enough to be effective. Apprentice had told me months ago he'd be able to turn fae into portal-makers of my own calibre, given a prisoner of sufficient rank, but I couldn't help but notice the portal he'd finagled was noticeably smaller than mine. I suspected there was another lecture about the ins and outs of turning fae into fodder for runic arrays on the horizon, and I wasn't looking forward to it. As for the knights of Callow, well, they'd carved their way through what must have been four thousand fae before withdrawing in good order. They would have taken more if the fae in front of them had not taken to the air instead of docilely allowing themselves to be run down. Now the Summer soldiers were attempting volleys, but even their tricky little fire arrows weren't swift enough to catch up to good cavalry on the move. The knights rode out of range, losing only score of men to the fire: heavy plate armour was nothing to sneer at, and without the fire sorcery those arrows were little different from mundane ones.

They formed up again and began wheeling around to take the fae in the back, to my delight. A few thousand Summer regulars had hastily formed a line where they'd been charging before, only to find themselves facing nothing. It took the edge off the mass attacking the walls of my camp as well, and on that side Afolabi's legionaries were teaching the fae how the Twelfth had earned its name. I might not like the man, but when it came to war he knew his business. I could already see a threat forming, though for now the advantage was ours. The fae who'd been readying themselves to weather another cavalry charge had nothing but a few hundred legionaries of the Fifteenth in front of them, and if they took it into their head to take that gate there wasn't much Juniper could do about it from her side. I'd have to give them something else to worry about.

"Captain," I said. "Get the message across: they're to meet me on the field. They just need to find the loudest screaming."

"Ma'am," Firasah saluted.

I rolled my shoulders under the plate. Shame I couldn't have prayers carved into it like the knights, but considering I'd kind of sold my soul to the Gods Below odds were all I'd get from that was charred skin. Well, maybe not sold. It'd been a little too casual for that, wasn't like I'd had a scribe make the transaction official. Pawned felt more accurate. I sent a runner to Nauk and watched as all around the central avenue of the camp barricades were set aside. Hakram came to me side not long after, fresh from the fighting on the outer palisades. His axe was slick with red and his pauldron cut straight through. His good mood was evident.

"Sortie?" he asked.

"About that time," I agreed, tying my hair in a ponytail.

I shut the claps of my helmet and slid on my gauntlets, flexing the armoured fingers carefully. Good. They might not be much help against a proper fae blade, but they did ensure that whenever I punched something it broke.

"Duchess Kegan sends word that she'll have regulars and the Watch follow," Adjutant said. "Since those winged knights aren't coming from us."

"Numbers?"

"Nine thousand total," the tall orc said. "Marshal Ranker is of the opinion that pulling off more will weaken the walls too much."

When it came to sieges, at least, I was inclined to follow the old goblin's lead. She'd been the one to mastermind the taking of Summerholm and Laure, during the Conquest.

"They're pulled as close and thick as we'll get them," I noted.

"She said the same thing," Adjutant grinned, like the ugly green cat who'd caught the bluejay. "First blooming before we begin our countercharge."

"You know, I'm sure there's a lot of things Summer is ready for," I mused. "Magic, flying fortresses, Named. Goblin engineering, though? I doubt it's one of them."

Nauk's two thousand formed into an avenue-wide battering ram, heavies at the front, and the Deoraithe readied behind them. I took the front, with Hakram at my side and the remains of the Gallowborne clustered around me. Behind us, near the centre of the camp, the sound of gears and pulleys releasing filled the air. A dozen ballista bolts tipped with cold iron screamed through air, followed a heartbeat later by trebuchet stones. The Gallowborne opened the gates wide for me, and in front of us I

saw scores of fae bleeding on the ground even as the ranks ahead were punctured with rocks the size of horses. Ranker had been kind enough to soften the opposition for us, and would continue pounding at the flanks as we drove forward. Gods was I glad the fae disdained machinery.

"FIFTEENTH," I called out, unsheathing my sword. "*FORWARD.*"

All the Hells broke loose, but for once we were the damned.

## Chapter 29: Scale

*"Ah, mortal wounds. My only weakness."*

– Dread Empress Sanguinia II

This wasn't like fighting devils. Wasn't like fighting mortal soldiers either, because mortal soldiers couldn't summersault in mail and swing swords like they were feathers. We'd bloodied the fae so far but that had been through tactics, no what I'd been taught to call qualitative superiority. It was one thing to lead Nauk's heavies in forcing a gate when we outnumbered the enemy ten to one, another to charge into a sea of Summer swords and expect to come out on top. We would have to anyway. If the eastern flank was allowed to collapse, we were all fucked. The knights had bought us a lull and they were far from done with the day's bloody work, but now the Fifteenth and its allies needed to bring it all home. Summer would have trump cards of its own, of that I had no doubt. I refused to believe all they had in their arsenal was regulars, winged knights and a handful of nobles. If that were the case, they wouldn't have a history of crushing Winter in open battle. My role, then, was to force the hidden blade into the open and promptly break it.

There were probably elegant ways to do that, fancy manoeuvres and strategies, but Akua hadn't been entirely wrong when she'd called me a thug. I didn't have the time for elegant, so watering the ground with red until something came to stop would have to do.

Fire greeted us when we came out screaming. Ribbons of flame shot out like spears, shivering through the air and burning clean through steel and flesh. The tongue that would have put a hole in my belly I cut without without missing a beat, and Hakram contemptuously ignored the fact that his own shoulder was smouldering. We were the only ones so dismissive: sorcery the fae had shaped in the span of a breath stopped a shield wall two hundred wide, and stopped it cold. We couldn't allow them to pull these kinds of surprises often, I thought. We didn't have the numbers to handle those kind of casualties. They could trade three fae for every legionary sallying and still have it be nothing more than a drop in the bucket. I'd enjoyed having the bigger army on my side, at the fortress of Olden Oak, but now I was back in familiar territory: outmanned and in way over my

head. I smashed into the Summer line like a runaway cart, the slivers of power I'd fed into my legs when I got close seeing me shoot forward quicker than the enemy had anticipated. I hacked my way through some poor fool's hand and threw him at the man behind him, face grim.

The hateful thing about the fae was that their sorcery was not rituals. Every one of them was at least a middling caster, and their tricks were heads and shoulders above those that the Legions taught their mages. Cutting my way into the throng had only killed the fire ribbons of the fae in front of me, the rest could have cared less. We weren't entirely unprepared, though. What few mages had not gone with Robber finished their ritual a few heartbeats later, disrupting the fae flames and allowing the heavies to finally close the distance. My insistence that Apprentice teach our mage contingents some things to deal with the fae was paying off, though they were few and no replacement at all for a caster of Masego's calibre. With Adjutant at my side, I set to keeping the fairies busy. Perspective went up in smoke as we waded into the enemy host, replaced by quick flashes of movement and steel. My shield was carved away strike by strike, ice growing to fill the gaps without the need for me to even will it as I traded glancing blows for death strokes. Calm, measured, ever going forward. This was not war, it was just a chore taken care of to the backdrop of screaming.

Nauk's voice screamed for a wedge to be made and to my sides legionaries took formation, shields high and swords piercing forward like this was just a drill on the training yard. Getting our foot in the door had been costly, I saw from the corpses and flickers of sorcery that still took lives every few heartbeats, but we had it. At this rate there would not be much left of Nauk's jessa by nightfall, but we had bought something precious with those lives: room for the Watch. The cloaked Deoraithe did not deign to use bows, this time. They took to the left of our wedge with knives and longswords, scything through the Summer regulars with war cries in the Old Tongue. The rank and file of Daoine's army poured in behind them, propping up the Fifteenth. They were no legionaries, but they were well-trained soldiers in mail with swords and shield that did not flinch in the face of sorcery. I caught all this in a glance, for it was all I could spare. The trail of dead behind me had apparently marked me as enough of a threat the fae were getting *inventive*.

I ran through a soldier but her charges' momentum had her collapsing on me, another three fae piling up on me as a dozen of them rose in the air and began calling on colourful lights. A few crossbow shots from the Gallowborne slowed them down, but I was too busy dealing with the writhing, clawing mass trying to pull down my shield to be thankful. The lights hit the lot of us like a dozen sharpeners, tearing through flesh and bone and blowing up straight off my feet. I was thrown against the raised shield of

one of my retinue and sharply refused his hand to help me up: my fucking shield was gone, again. And my sword was bent and burned to the point of uselessness. Those *pricks*. I'd spat in Malicia's soup already, where did they think I was going to be getting goblin steel from now on? I sidestepped a spear, chucked the remains of my sword into the man's face and ripped the weapon out of the fae's hands. Had no idea how to use one of these, so I snapped it in half and broke a soldier's jaw with the shaft before taking her exposed throat with the point.

She had a sword, thank the Gods, so I lifted it up her corpse and took it in hand. Too light and long for my tastes, but it would do. Anyways, it wasn't technically corpse-robbing if the battle wasn't over right? Deoraithe arrows took care of the flying casters before they could have another go at blowing me up – and huh, my breastplate was actually melted and I simply hadn't noticed – so I gripped the neck of a fae trying to put a spear in Hakram's back and squeezed until something gave with an ugly crack. He grunted thanks and I waved them away, barely remembering to drop the corpse in my grip first. The Fifteenth had gained ground since the Watch had taken the field, steadily advancing as the cloaked lot essentially took care of the left flank. Watching the fights there was hard on the eyes. The Deoraithe were as quick as the fae and twice as ruthless, deaths on both sides happening almost faster than the naked eye could see. Whoever led Summer now that the Princess of High Noon was busy beating Winter royalty raw had to know they were in trouble, I thought.

Our sortie had put a knife in their bellies, and between the knights and the Watch the palisades had managed to sort themselves out. Ranker's engines were still pounding wherever the fae were thickest, and though bloody trails could no longer be seen now that they'd gotten used to it every shot still left its share of dead. The trade of corpses was in our favour, and if Juniper managed to get enough men on this side of the gate then we'd have them encircled on three sides and it wouldn't *matter* if they were more than us – it was the soldiers at the edge of the circle that fought, not those in the middle. They needed a win on one of the three sides, and they needed it quick because even if they unfucked one of the flanks as long as my sortie went unchecked there was a chance we'd split the meat of their army in two. If we did, they were done. *So bring out your monsters*, I thought. *Now is the time*.

The fae lines parted and I finally got to see Summer's answer to the Sword of Waning Day, the deadwood soldiers that had given me so much trouble on our first encounter. Fae tended to prefer mail, and light one at that, but these were different. Heavy plate of gold from foot to neck, thick gleaming rubies dotting it in arcane patterns. Golden armet helms atop, with the thin slit for their eyes steaming from whatever was inside. Long heater

shields polished like golden mirrors, almost as if someone had tried to make a kite shield for a footman, covered their left flanks. In their right hands halberds of pure ivory were held. Was I supposed to be impressed they used a two-handed weapon with one hand? I was pretty sure I could do the same. Wherever the tread the greenery smoked and died, which did not bode particularly well. If they were half as good as killing as the deadwood soldiers, then Nauk's legionaries were going to rout. I'd taken *Named* to handle a few members of the Sword of the Waning Day, and there must have been at least ten thousand of these shiny bastards ahead of me.

Well, at least I knew what part of this battlefield the enemy commander was most worried about. I looked at those rubies, and the armours that seemed made of pure gold.

"Catherine," Hakram gravelled. "Why are you smiling?"

"Because by the time this is all over, I'll be able to afford rebuilding Marchford," I said.

The golden fae slammed the butts of their halberds against the ground as one, a wave of heat washing over me and everyone else I could see. The warmth didn't leave, afterwards, it hung in the air. The Summer fae in it quickened, while my legionaries grew sluggish. Oh that was just *bullshit*. Warlock could probably do something similar, but there weren't *ten thousand* of the handsome bastard. Ranker, bless her wretched goblin soul, caught the danger. She had the ballistas fire at the golden fae, a dozen bolts that should have punctured their ranks. Instead the cold iron-tipped bolts hung in the air mere feet in front of them, and slowly began to turn. That, uh, wasn't a great development.

"Dodge," I yelled.

On the bright side, they'd been aiming for *Named* and not legionaries. Unfortunately that meant me, and even though I flattened myself against the ground and avoided the worst of it two of them tore into the same shoulder. Gods, those things were fucking heavy. I bit my lips to avoid screaming and crawled on the ground trying to get them out as the golden fae began to advance. My fingers were twitching too much, pain continuing to roll through my body in harsh waves. It was the iron, wasn't it? You couldn't steal fae power and not expect to have some fae weaknesses come with it. Adjutant was the one who got them out of me, and I muttered **Rise** through gritted teeth as my broke shoulders and ribs snapped back in place and the wounds slowly started to close. The well was beginning to run dry, I could feel. Another damned liability I was going to have to deal with. Hakram's plate was dented in three places, but the bolts hadn't broken through. The sight was no comfort. He must have called on his aspect for that, and that was another advantage we'd just lost.

"Is it possible to bruise a lung?" I said, spitting a thick gob of blood to the side. "Because I think I bruised a lung."

Whatever Hakram would have replied I didn't get to hear, because I was too busy exploding. Or at least that was what it felt like. At least a few of my ribs were now more powder than bone, an entire pauldron was liquid and burning through my aketon and to add that special touch I was now falling. From the sky. Where I did not remember going of my own will. I coughed blood again but managed to shape a pane of shadow and ice under me, landing on it like a rag doll. The strange noise of fae wings in action erupted, and a dark-skinned woman in mail of jade came to face me. Her eyes were golden as the armour of the fae who'd been wrecking my day, golden as the Diabolist's. For all that, she was no Soninke. Her power filled the air so thickly I could almost taste it. Duchess, I thought. She had to be. Unlike the Summer nobles I'd fought so far, she did not talk and posture. She pointed the tip of her sword at me, and I hastily broke the panel that held me up. The air where I'd been exploded again, not in flames or light but as if the wind itself had gone mad. Another panel formed under me, and this time I landed on my feet.

"**Rise,**" I barked.

The ribs began to fix themselves but it was slow work and Gods I might not be able to afford slowness.

"Wither," the duchess said, her voice stunningly musical.

Three panels, I judged in less time than it took for my heart to beat. That was how many supports I'd need to leap my way to her. I moved before the thought was finished, and that was the only reason I survived. The hem of my cloak was caught in the area where her power surged, and the cloth thinned and dried instantly. Considering the amount of water there was in my body, the thought of what would have happened to me if I hadn't moved was chilling. I moved faster than any mortal could have, but in the sky only the fae reigned. When I landed on my second panel she simply flew higher and pointed her sword at me again. *Fuck*. This wasn't a Rider of the Host I was scrapping with. If I kept this up, I was going to get killed. I unmade the panel and dropped down another fifteen feet before landing on another. We were staggeringly high, I only now noticed. That first hit had sent me up as if I'd been tossed by a trebuchet. Below us the golden fae had engaged the Fifteenth and the Watch, and the engagement was gruesomely one-sided. I needed to wrap this up quick if I wanted to have an army left by the time I broke my legs landing.

"Aren't you supposed to introduce yourself before we tangle?" I called out.



If nothing else, her title would give me a better read on what her powers came from.

"I am the Duchess of Restless Zephyr," she replied. "You are a corpse."

I wasn't particularly fond of being on the wrong side of that line, I decided. The healing power I'd stolen from the Lone Swordsman was being a real trooper about getting me back into fighting shape, but it only worked so fast. At least I was no longer in any danger of choking on my lungs. I leapt another two panels upwards to avoid getting exploded after her announcement, keenly aware that I was burning through power quickly. Even just maintaining a panel was draining, and unless I wanted my blood to turn to ice again I was going to have to find another solution.

"Would you like to make a wager?" I called out.

*Come on, you're fae, I thought. You lot feed are always up for a bet.*

"No," she replied, after trying to explode me again.

That was starting to get old, I would admit. *Play to her nature, Catherine. She wants a kill, not a crippling. She's been throwing around hard hits since we started.*

"I am going to destroy you in one blow," I lied, sword rising above my head as if I was preparing some trump card I really wished I had right now.

The Duchess of Restless Zephyr laughed. She was maybe thirty feet below me, and in the face of the flaring of my Name she smiled mockingly.

"You are no true duchess," she said. "Just a mortal playing the fool. Learn your place."

Unlike my parchment-thin deception, the ball of roiling winds that formed above her head was very much a threat. She kept feeding power into it while I tried to look like I knew what I was doing. Which I might. Maybe. It was a gamble with horrendous odds, but still better than jumping around beneath the clouds and hoping she ran out of juice before I did. Studying her face I gauged when she was about to finish preparations, the sneer and hint of triumph giving it away. If I got hit by that ball, what was left of me was going to rain all over this battlefield in little chunks. I really hoped that would hold out for her as well, because I was about to surrender an advantage that had saved my life at least three times in the last year. Her wrist began to move my fingers tightened around the hilt of the sword I'd stolen.

**"Take,"** I said.

Her eyes went wide as we both felt the same thing: my Name claiming ownership over the winds she'd been gathering. The remains of what I'd stolen from the Lone Swordsman vanished, and instead a painful surge filled the aspect. I gritted my teeth to avoid screaming. Claiming Summer power when I was already bound to the Winter Court felt like my insides turning out. I struck down with my sword and the ball of winds followed, smashing into her and detonating. Dry winds howled all around as the arm she brought up to shield herself was ground out of existence, her tall silhouette plummeting down like a gold of old had kicked her back down to Creation. My control over the winds was beginning to wane, and I hurriedly forced them down to follow the Duchess. She'd fallen in the back of the lines of golden fae, the ground heaving at the impact, and that was where the winds unleashed the fullness of their fury. Fae were scattered like insects, the hurricane my opponent had meant to destroy me with blooming life a flower in every direction. That, I mused, should help my army get their bearings back.

Then the winds contracted, crushing whatever they'd drawn in with them, and shot back up towards me as my aspect once again became a shapeless bundle of power needing to be defined.

**"Shit,"** I said, for my wit was peerless in any world.

I was quick to flee, but not quick enough. The ball had been popped already, but the winds were far from tender: they pulsed and detonated into a circle that had me sailing through the sky for the second time today. And was that the feeling of another rib breaking? Ah, no, just fracturing. It had happened to me often enough that I was beginning to be able to tell the difference just from the kind of pain that had me clenching my teeth. I couldn't even tell what direction I was falling in. I shaped a pane of ice in front of me but I was going so fast I just tore right through it. Another two tries only managed to slow me down and cut the side of my neck with shards. The landing was going to be problem, I mused. And this time I couldn't rely on stolen hero tricks to get me back on my feet afterwards. I was debating creating three panes in a row to see if that would do the trick when I felt my fall slow. Yanked out of the air, I started to float down like a feather until I was caught in a strong pair of arms.

**"We meet again, Foundling,"** Archer grinned.

**"Are you seriously trying to pretend you were the one to cast the spell?"** Masego asked peevishly. **"You're not even a mage."**

I sighed, leaning back bonelessly in Archer's arms so I could stare at the braided Soninke.

"Hello, Apprentice," I said.

"Do I need to explain to you how gravity works," Masego said, "And what it does to the bones of women in plate falling from the sky?"

"I am invincible," I gravely said. "Gravity bends to my will."

Naturally, Archer took that as an excuse to drop me.

## Chapter 30: Riot

*"The classic Callowan blunder. Sending an army into the Wasteland you can't handle if it comes marching back as undead."*

-Dread Emperor Sorcerous

Magical healing felt slow and inefficient, after having grown to the heroic alternative, but it had to be said that Masego was exceedingly good at it. It was better not to think about how many people he must have needed to cut open to get there. Hopefully at least the majority of them had been dead at the time, though with Warlock you could never be sure. It was all flying pigs until he got in a mood, then it was corpses all around. Apprentice politely clapped my shoulder to signify he was done and I rose from my crouch.

"You'll need a blacksmith to truly rectify the state of your armour," he said. "But it is no longer liquid, at least."

Speaking of liquid, Archer was polishing off the bottom of a copper flask even as we spoke. The two of them seemed in a decent mood, though not eager to join the fray. Given that Summer's army could be quite literally world-ending if it got into the swing of things, I didn't blame them. I got the blood and what looked like flakes of skin off the hilt of my sword – Gods, those were probably mine weren't they? – and took a deep breath.

"All right," I said. "First we need to pick up Hakram. Before we do, Archer, could you tell me what the Hells your teacher is doing here?"

She ignored me, finished guzzling down whatever liquor she was packing and dropped the flask to the ground. It was a good thing the enemy already knew where we were, otherwise no doubt they could find out just by following the trail of those that no doubt followed in her wake.

"No idea, Foundling," she replied cheerfully. "She won't be here for the princes and princesses. She got bored with those a while back. Whatever it is, though? I recommend not being even remotely in the vicinity of her way. That, uh, doesn't tend to go well for people. And gods. And castle that one time."

It said a lot about the Lady of the Lake's reputation that I wouldn't be particularly surprised if she'd destroyed an entire keep because it had made the poor decision of being built somewhere inconvenient to her. Black had told me there were to people on Calernia against whom it was useless to think in terms of victory, where one could only attempt to limit the damage and lose the least amount of skin possible. One was the Dead King, who he'd charmingly referred to as 'the original abomination'. The other was the Ranger, whose utter disregard for odds I'd been raised hearing stories about.

"Well, I'm not intending to get in a fistfight for her, that's for sure," I grimaced. "I've recently run out of borrowed lives."

"I fear you may run out of ribs as well, if you keep at it," Masego drily said.

Now that was just unwarranted. I hadn't broken any of those in, like, at least sixty heartbeats. I was going to ask about having them reinforced with steel, though, because nowadays they were snapping like twigs.

"I can't commend your judgement but your pain tolerance is impressive," Archer added, never one to leave someone unkicked while they were down.

I flipped her off.

"Goat-daughter," she replied in Taghrebi, ridiculously proud of knowing the word.

"Masego have you been teaching her cusses?" I sighed.

"It was either that or arguing about whether Creation is a sphere again," he admitted.

I raised an eyebrow at Archer.

"I'm just saying, do you know anyone who's gone the whole way around?" she said. "Have you done it yourself?"

Apprentice twitched and I decided to change the subject before he went on a rant about how he'd proved Creation was round. I knew better than to hope he did not have three philosophers and several volumes to reference.

"We'll table that for later," I ordered. "I, uh, left Adjutant back in the middle of the melee. Anyone have any suggestions of how to take him out? Our target is east."

I ignored Apprentice's peevish murmur about how Hakram, at least, probably hadn't broken any ribs. That was a deeply unfair comparison, the orc had a whole aspect about not breaking.

"We could kill our way through," Archer suggested.

Ah, Archer. Violence wasn't her only tool, just the only one she ever bothered to use.

"I'm open to other suggestions," I prompted.

That was when the screaming began. Sword in hand faster than I could blink, I turned to look at the source of it. It was only one voice, though a remarkably loud one. The Duchess of Restless Zephyr was back in the sky, missing an arm and most the half of the body attached to it. One of her wings was pure flame, I saw, which made her flight awkward but admittedly still better than I could manage.

"I'd *really* hoped she was dead," I said.

"She seems peeved," Masego said, master of observation that he was.

"You could say we didn't part on great terms," I conceded.

The dark-skinned mage's eyes glimmered with Name power, peering at the Duchess.

"She's bleeding out power," he noted. "Her very frame is unstable. I expect she will detonate, left alone long enough."

Archer whistled merrily, stringing her bow.

"Never bagged a duchess before," she said.

"That'd be kill-stealing and you know it," I said.

I did not, however, tell her not to put arrows in the woman until the issue went away. It was one thing to banter with my companions, another to allow a threat of that magnitude to live even a moment longer than she needed to. It swiftly became clear that screaming at the top of her lungs was more than a coping mechanism for the fae. A pack of a hundred winged knights peeled off from the rest, lances high as they formed up around her. It would have been untrue to say I felt the weight of the Duchess' gaze, but I was pretty sure if she was capable of glaring someone aflame I'd be a bonfire right now.

"I might run out of arrows," Archer said. "The fancy ones, at least."

I eyed her quiver, which looked plain but had as much sorcery wafting off of it as all her enchanted ammunition put together.

"They're in range, for you?" I asked.

"Sweetcheeks," she grinned. "There's not a damn thing in any world that *isn't*."

It was talk like that that had me believing the ochre-skinned woman wasn't a villain. None of us who'd managed to live this long would so willingly dip down hubris and slip it too much tongue. Archer wasn't all boasting, at least. She nocked her first arrow smoothly and released almost quicker than I could follow. The arrow flew. A hundred yards from the fae it was buried in a wave of flame and I thought that the end of that, but moments later a single silhouette fell from its horse. I sharpened my eyes and let out a staggered breath. Right between the eyes, from at least a mile.

"See?" Archer preened.

"Archer," I tried.

"I told you," she interrupted.

"Archer they are *charging*," I barked. "*Keep shooting.*"

She pouted, but smooth movements followed and arrows took the sky. I looked at Masego, who seemed more bored than worried.

"I don't suppose you have something to stop a cavalry charge?" I asked.

"It is unlikely any of my wards would do more than slow them down," he said. "In Arcadia, that is. Layering is pointless if they unmake the layers as fast as I craft them."

"Keep the Duchess busy, then," I ordered. "She has this nasty wind trick."

Speaking of the devil, the screaming had ceased. She was hurtling through the air, keeping up with the knights, and pointing her sword at us. The rider next to her toppled from an arrow through the neck, Archer chuckling at my side.

"Masego," I said urgently.

The air exploded, but a transparent box formed around it. The winds howled, barely contained.

"Interesting," Apprentice praised. "Derivative work, of course, but fae do tend to keep close to their title and Court."

The box contracted until it broke, and the wind dispersed with a hiss. Gods I'd missed having a powerful mage around. It made it so much easier not to die. Archer was ignoring us, taking apart the knights one at a time. How many had she slain, easy as swatting a fly? Twenty, maybe more. When she ceased moving, though, I cleared my throat.

"There's still some left," I helpfully pointed out.

"I'm out of mage-killers," she said.

The air exploded again. This time Masego had evolved his defensive measure: a series of transparent walls redirected the fury of the wind, ultimately heading back towards the charging fae. It dispersed long before reaching any of them, but just what he'd been able to do might be deterrent enough that the Duchess wouldn't try it again. If she'd pulled that when they were closer, they would have lost a few for sure.

"You don't have any other enchanted ones?" I asked.

"None that are fireproof," she said, calmly unstringing her bow.

Given the size of the thing I would have said something about overcompensating, but now that I'd actually seen her use it the words stayed stuck in my mouth. Skill was skill, no matter how ridiculous-looking the tool enabling it. Archer unsheathed her longknives, tapping one against her leg impatiently.

"They could hurry up, at least," she complained. "Not like we can charge back at them."

"Oh my," Masego murmured. "That could... No, first I'd have to overtake the matrix."

"Apprentice," I said, a little worried.

"Everything is going to be fine," he said dreamily, eyes still filled with Name power.

I had never more wished to have a shield. And so the three of us stood valiantly against the coming charge. Apprentice was muttering to himself, lost in his own world, Archer had taken to cleaning her fingernails with one of her blades and I was silently wishing I could just duplicate Hakram a few times and not have to rely on these two anymore. More like valiant-adjacent, maybe. I steadied my breath and adjusted my stance as the knights and Duchess angled their descent, the lot of them moving flawlessly together.

"Whither," the Duchess of Restless Zephyr screamed.

"**Deconstruct**," Apprentice replied, fingers dancing across a stream of shining runes.

The fae aristocrat yelped, losing control of her spell. The bone-dry winds slipped her leash, turning on her. Her wing of flame dispersed as her body turned to a husk, skin turning to leather in the span of a heartbeat. She crashed, but I couldn't spare a longer look than that: I was too busy trying not to get skewered. Flattening under the lance wouldn't work. I'd never

gotten anywhere by betting against fae reflexes. Instead I sunk into my Name, let the calm wash over me and watched the tip of the weapon. *The only dangerous part of a lance is the tip, I told myself*, repeating Black's words. I pivoted around it at the last moment, letting the knight pass me by. Immediately I had to duck under the horse of the man behind him, sword coming up to split its belly open. I emerged drenched in blood and guts to see the third rank was too far ahead to strike me, but the fourth had adjusted its angle. And was converging on me. Apprentice came to the rescue, a sphere-like black rip into the fabric of Arcadia forming amongst the fae. It didn't seem to do much but draw them closer to it, but it should keep them busy for at least a bit.

That left the first rank, which had deftly landed on the ground and was turning back around. I heard screams and laughter to the side, which probably meant Archer wasn't in too much trouble. Even as lances turned to me, I felt an itch between my shoulder blades. I knew better than to ignore the hints of my Name, and moved before a thrown javelin could add a steel component to my spine. The thrown weapon sunk into the ground and exploded in flames, the enemy knights riding straight through the screen of fire. This, I decided, was not going to work. Even if the Duchess didn't come back from her mistake, there was only so long I could keep avoiding being run through. Especially if I had to dodge javelins at the same time. Relief came in the shape of Archer, who barrelled into the flank of the knights charging me. She was riding a horse, because of course she was. Two arrows were stuck in her mount's neck and she used them to guide it along with no small amount of spurring. That... could work. Maybe. I wasn't above fleeing a losing fight. Masego's black sphere must have petered out, because I heard the whistle of javelins let loose followed by neighs.

I was already moving, though, and the thumped into the ground behind me. There were still half a dozen knights after my hide, even though Archer was making a joyous nuisance of herself, and it was those I went for. They were on the ground now, and while the sky belonged to the fae down here they were in my wheelhouse. I ran at them, smoothly cutting the distance. They'd learned from the last time, adjusted to my speed, and when I pivoted around the first lance I found another two aimed at my chest. An exertion of will had a panel of ice forming in the way, breaking instantly but buying me a precious few heartbeats. I pushed a sliver of power down my legs and leapt at the knight I'd just avoided, colliding with him atop the winged horse. I took a hard knock in the nose and he tried to to slide a knife in my ribs, but I caught his wrist and twisted it to throw him off the horse. Which was not best pleased about this turn of events. I tried to slide my feet into the stirrups, but the neighing fucker was bucking me off. And now the other knights were back at me. Great. I had to throw myself off to avoid taking a javelin in the chest.



"Fine," I growled. "The hard way."

I rammed my sword through the horse's eye as my free hand whipped up to blast a knight off his horse with a spear of shadow. I kept the power close, forcefully shoving it into the dying mount through my blade. The beast twitched once, twice, and its dark eyes went pure blue. That was new.

"Up," I ordered, and it rose back to its feet.

I leapt on, and this time there was no bucking. I looked for the others and found Archer had already retreated, and forced a visibly dismayed Masego to ride with his arms around her belly. Considering Apprentice hated even regular horses, a winged one had to be a nightmare for him. I set my mount to riding with my mind alone, the knights gathering in a wedge behind me. That was going to be a problem.

"Retreat," I called out.

Archer laughed, but at least she listened. I dug into the muscle memories of the horse I'd raised and put on my finger on the part that concerned flight. The wings extended brusquely and as I screamed it began batting its wings and we rose into the air. So did our pursuers. The feeling of the wind whipping at my face was exhilarating, but death followed close. They were already gaining. I sent the horse downwards to avoid a javelin, but when it exploded into flames the fire formed into a hawk and hurtled back towards me. Within moments a menagerie of birds was forcing me into acrobatics that had my heels digging into the flanks of the dead horse – Zombie the Third, I mentally named him – as I tried my best not to fall off. The other two caught up with me and I gestured towards our forces still fighting on the field, but Apprentice shook his head.

"The Duchess," he said.

My arm whipped out to cut through the shaft of a javelin. I smothered the fire that came out with ice before it could form. Godsdamnit.

"Fine," I yelled. "I'll draw them off."

I took a sharp right to avoid incineration, flicking my wrist to send a knife into my palm. The knights were on me. This was going to be *tricky*. They had range, damn them. The knight at the tip of the wedge rammed his lance halfway through into my mount's body, but it was too dead to care at the moment. I leapt off my horse onto the bastard, desperately trying to convince myself this was a good idea. My armoured boots hit his chest and he fell off, but brilliant wings burst into existence. Right, falling wasn't a problem for them. I managed to land on the saddle but my boots were slick with blood and it was bucking – even as I began to

slide I saw the lance going for my knee. *Don't die, don't die, don't die.* My foot landed on the tip of the lance and even as it ripped into the saddle I kicked the fae's chin. Blood sprayed and teeth with it. I began to fall but managed to sink my knife into the horse's flank, hoisting myself back up. The Name reflexes were barely enough to save my life, sword coming up to slap aside another lance so it just pierced through my only previous pauldron. Heat at my back, it was time to move. The wave of flame hawks was at my heel.

The horse was beginning to go down so I leapt off again, screaming every Mtethwa curse I knew and then some. The knight I impacted didn't manage to bring up his lance in time, but he did manage to sock me in the mouth with an armoured hand. I tasted blood. My knife found his throat, and I took the trade gladly. Heat again, and so close I left the blade. I bunched up for another jump but it was too late. I was blown off by a storm of flame, what little skin I had exposed taking the brunt of it as even my plate warmed. I grit my teeth and formed a pane of ice to land on, licking my busted lip and pointing my sword at the fae.

"Taking all comers," I croaked out. "You only outnumber what, fifty to one?"

Half the lances flickered with light and turned into swords as they fluidly formed in a circle around me. Bury me in numbers, would they? And this time with blades to take care of me if the lances failed. I panted quietly, and planned the timing. My control was still rough. As one, without a word, they charged. There would be no dancing around all those blades, Named or not. It was a good thing I didn't intend to. I watched the enemy close in and, at the last moment, broke the pane. I began falling again as the knights closed in on empty space, though disappointingly enough they were too skilled for collisions to ensue. The smoothly slid around each other even as I landed with a thump atop Zombie the Third, almost slipping again before I shoved my boots into the stirrups. I wasted no time in getting the Hells out of there. That was as long as I could buy the other two. They'd gainfully employed my many near-death experiences, I saw. The Duchess of Restless Zephyr, still unconscious, hung floating in a bubble of blue light Masego was dragging behind them with a chain made of the same. I caught up with them before the knight caught up with me: dragging the fae aristocrat slowed them down.

"I swear on all the bloody Gods, Apprentice, if you had me do that just to get a live duchess I'll bury you so deep underground you will never see light again," I yelled.

Brow creased in concentration, he waved dismissively. We fled towards the melee, where things were not unfolding as well as I'd hoped. The attack I'd stolen from the Duchess had slowed the golden fae down, but they'd formed back up and even with the

Watch backing it the Fifteenth was taking a beating. At a glance, half of Nauk's legionaries were already dead. The entire line was buckling, even with the Deoraithe regulars propping them up. We managed to get in bow range before the knights were on us, and it was enough to make them break off at least for now. *Close*, I thought. I caught sight of Hakram swinging his axe towards the centre of our line, but he was having trouble with the enemy. They were fast as a Named, and though not as strong as the orc there were a lot of them. I guided my horse down, but Masego called out for me to wait. I watched my companions pass over the golden fae, and there Apprentice cut off the chain binding the bubble to him. A moment later the bubble popped out and the Duchess began to fall, dropping in the ranks of the golden fae. Nothing happened.

I glanced at Apprentice, who was fiddling with runes, and only looked away when I heard the world groan. Bone-dry winds formed around the Duchess' body and blew up violently, turning the fae by it into empty husks that fell apart like sand. It continued to grow, the winds scattering in every direction and tearing a gaping hole in the golden fae formation. *Masego, you beautiful sack of pedantry. That might just even the field out.* The dead horse smoothly flew down, and I landed in front of a gaping Adjutant as the winds whipped behind me.

"Get on," I ordered. "We're hunting royalty."

## Chapter 31: High Noon

*"My dear friends, I have a confession to make. Some creative reframing of the truth may have taken place during the planning of this coup."*

– Dread Emperor Traitorous, addressing the Order of the Unholy Obsidian upon successfully usurping the throne from himself

Now, in my experience planning the ending of a lesser god required three necessary steps. The first of them was, naturally, lies. Though this once I had found no make-believe prophecy to ensure this fight did not begin and end with my being incinerated, I *had* prepared a few nasty surprises. The Summer Court didn't really bother to talk with mortals except to give them orders, as far as I knew, and that was going to come back to haunt them. The second step was a certain proficiency for violence, which between four battle-hardened Named we should have covered. There would be no talk of my taking on the Princess of High Noon by myself. That would return us to the whole incineration outcome, which I would confess I was less than fond of. Archer would have less of an impact using longknives instead of a bow, true, but with her and Adjutant at my side we might be able to keep the princess distracted long enough Apprentice could hit her with the good stuff. Well, Evil stuff. The labyrinthine

mess that was adjusting my terminology now that I was consorting with the damned could wait to be sorted until there was less of a war going on.

With a little luck, at some point in the next decade I'd have a day where no one was actively trying to invade Callow. That was the dream, really.

The third step was having a *right* to that victory. It was different than the false prophecy I'd used to kill the Duke of Violent Squalls. One was, as I liked to think of it, plausible deniability. It gave me an excuse to win, if I could manage it. After all, I'd still had to stab the bastard to get his stuff. Having a right was more like fixing the scales, the way Fate did for heroes. It was still short of providence, the golden luck that dropped the laurels in the lap of the Heavens' favourites, but it was close. When I'd fought Heiress and the Lone Swordsman in Liesse, I'd walked over two Named that were each a match for me on their own on my way to take the sword in the stone and my resurrection with it. The weights of the scale had been in my favour, then. It didn't guarantee victory, but it made it easier for me to win and harder for my opponents. The signet ring had done the same thing for the Duke of Violent Squalls. I'd 'always had it', which at least in Arcadia had given me claim to the fae's power before it was physically on my finger.

Finding an equivalent for the Princess of High Noon had been the hardest part of this. I couldn't just rely on the fact that she had invaded Callow: I was, however unwillingly, doing the same to Summer. That scratched off the mark on both sides of the slate, I was betting. There were dozens of stories about hard-headed young girls facing down gods for some cause or another, but all of them about heroes. I'd wiggled my way into that sort of role before, but only when standing for a greater cause than myself. I fell short of that here. They keystone would have to be found in the way that even with my Named companions I still stood hilariously outclassed. It was an old shape, that, the underdog triumphing over the unbeatable opponent. I'd chewed on that for days, pruning story after story until I returned to one of the oldest ones I knew. From before the House of Light, when Calernians had prayed to the Gods Above and Below but also made sure to give offerings to the ancient things that strode the world. Dread Emperor Sorcerous had once famously called usurpation the essence of sorcery. There was a deeper grain of truth in that, one broader in meaning. Transgression was the essence of what it meant to be Named. Breaking the rules for your own sake or that of others. And one of the most ancient of those transgressions was the blade meant to break the Princess of High Noon. *The theft of fire.*

Would it be enough? I could not know. Never did, until the blades were out and chaos reigned. But I'd gotten this far by doubling

down whenever the stakes were raised, and I would not flinch today.

The four of us had flown east, to where the fae clashed. Winter was not getting the better of it. The centre, where the Sword of Waning Day fought, had managed to gain ground. But the flanks were collapsing. The Riders of the Host had managed a harsh draw with the winged knights of Summer, but come out more bloodied and forced to retreat. To the sides the Summer regulars were driving back the Winter fae one step at a time, defeat already writ large. It would end with the deadwood soldiers an island in a Summer sea, collapsing when the winged knights returned to shatter their lines. While the lesser fae died in droves, the royalty that led them had fought just the same. There again, Winter was losing. The Prince of Nightfall now stood alone against the Princess of High Noon and the Prince of Deep Drought, the princess who'd been with him nowhere in sight. They were on the ground now, the armies giving all three of them a wide berth. I did not like the one-eyed prince. He'd been party to his king's playing of me, and been free with threats besides.

Watching him battle two other royals, though, I felt a reluctant sliver of admiration. I'd not been wrong, in thinking him made for strife more than any other fae of Winter. The Princess of High Noon was more powerful., blatantly so. She moved like a storm unrelenting, howling winds stirring in the wake of every strike as she crushed everything in her way. The Prince of Deep Drought had been wounded, one of his arms held to his body only be strings of red, but he wove sorcery like an artist. Flame and light and dust, moving with Princess Sulia as if it knew her movements intimately. And facing that fury was a one-eyed man, clad in a long tunic of shade with a slender blade in hand. Trying to strike him was like trying to grasp a shadow, and though he was outmatched in every way he did not retreat a single step. None of the three paid us any mind when we took the winged horses down, dismounting more swiftly than gracefully. Hakram had been pale as sheet the whole ride, and was now visibly glad of being on solid ground. I glanced at my companions, then cleared my throat. I supposed I would have to say something before leading them into the storm.

"So we're going to stab a god," I said. "I mean, we've done it before. But this one is a few places higher in the pecking order of things not to trifle with."

Archer snorted.

"But we'll win because we stand for something greater than ourselves?" I gallantly attempted.

"We do?" Apprentice asked, surprise. "What?"

"Violence," Archer suggested.

"Peace, order and the Imperial way," Hakram offered, the filthy traitor.

"We lie a lot," Masego mused. "It could be lies."

"Lies and violence," Archer proudly called out, raising a fist.

Apprentice did the same, apparently under the impression this qualified as a battle cry. I refused to grace the mutiny with a response.

"Just don't get yourselves killed," I sighed. "I don't want to have to train up replacements."

The fae royalty took notice when we joined their little tiff, the Summer fae breaking off and angling so we wouldn't be able to flank them. The Winter prince offered us a mocking salute with his sword.

"I'm guessing the Princess of Silent Depths is dead," I said, not bothering with greetings.

"That is mostly accurate," the Prince of Nightfall replied, because why would fae ever be anything but vague?

"Can you handle the sorcerer?" I asked, eyeing the Prince of Deep Drought.

"He cannot," the Summer prince sneered.

"Yes," the one-eyed fae replied with a nasty smile. "You'll be dancing with Sulia?"

"That's the idea," I agreed. "I put together a crew of miscreants and everything."

The red-haired princess eyed me like I'd tracked mud onto her priceless carpet, or maybe like I was the mud.

"They have made an abomination of you," she said. "More than mortal, less than fae. Destroying you will be a mercy."

"I get that a lot," I replied honestly.

At least in Procer, the House of Light had apparently declared me anathema to the Heavens. I knew because Black had the report framed and sent to Marchford. It hung on the wall of my bedroom across from the bed.

"Shall we begin, Granian?" the Prince of Nightfall taunted his Summer mirror. "I've been meaning to see how many limbs you can lose before dying."

The Winter fae's translucent wings burst into existence and he shot off into the sky. The Prince of Deep Drought looked at Sulia and she nodded. He followed, leaving the four of us facing the heaviest hitter the Summer Court had to offer short of its queen. Why had this seemed like a good idea again?

"I played your role, for an evening," I told the princess. "Was a bit of a bore. Had to liven it up myself."

"I was not made for intrigue," the Princess of High Noon said. "This, however? I was born for it. From it. This was a blunder, Duchess. You are attempting a story, but that is worthless if you do not have the power to carry it out."

"You think you're my opponent," I smiled coldly. "An interesting thought. Let's see where it gets you."

Three things happened in the heartbeat that followed. Princess Sulia's wings sprang to life. Adjutant and Archer charged forward. And I spoke one word.

**"Take,"** I said.

Two columns of fire erupted from my back, not concerned by the plate in the slightest. I screamed hoarsely, but this was a necessary sacrifice. If she went up, we were done. She could just stay up there and bombard us until there was nothing left but ashes, and trying to match her up there with the horses was a good way to get ourselves killed. I felt the Winter power in my veins reacting violently, even worse than when I'd stolen sorcery from the Duchess of Restless Zephyr. These were only wings, even if made of sorcery, but the power was so much *purier* it felt a dozen times worse. I hastily discarded the power, heralding the first bet of this fight. What happened when I took something was still unclear in a lot of ways. Would she get the wings back even if I released them? I was hoping not, that my aspect severed the connection by appropriating what I took. If that wasn't the case, I was going to have to pull out an upset that I *really* needed to come later. The flames gutted out and I let out a hiss of triumph when they didn't reappear on the princess' back. This might not be a permanent state of affair, but for now it was putting our foot in the door.

Apprentice was incanting, the light of runes glinting off his spectacles. We needed to keep him uninterrupted long enough to make a difference. I'd never fought at Archer's side before, not with her using blades, but Hakram had felt like an additional limb ever since he became the Adjutant and he was used to her from all their sparring. Four blades struck as one and it felt *right*. Like coming home. The fae's sword clattered against mine, beginning to carve through until ice grew to stop it. The princess ducked under the swing of Adjutant's axe, pushing me back effortlessly and smashing Archer in the belly with her fist.

The other Named was thrown off, but she landed on her feet and she was back into the fray within moments. Heat pulsed off the princess and cold came from me too met it. Her power dwarfed mine, but she would not win this uncontested. The three of us pressed the offensive. Without even a word needing to be said, we fell into a rhythm. I forced a parry, setting the fae up for Adjutant's strike as Archer used the opening it made to attempt to draw blood.

She was beating us anyway. Flame blew Hakram off his feet, charring his face, and without him to distract Archer was caught by the throat. I desperately wove ice and shadow around the princess' wrist, and the heartbeat it took for her to disperse it earned my companion just long enough to wriggle out of the grasp. Her breath was laboured, but at least her neck hadn't been snapped.

**"Rampage,"** Adjutant growled.

The orc charged back into the fight, his charred skin healing. Every strike was stronger and faster than the last, until even the Princess of High Noon had to take care.

**"Flow,"** Archer managed to croak.

It was almost hypnotic to watch her longknives move. There was no single blow, every attack coming from the last in an uninterrupted stream. She moves as she had when firing arrows, but that was comparing a candle to a bonfire. Between the three of us, we almost stood a chance. I turned a probe into a lunge that would have taken the princess in the neck, but she contemptuously moved an inch to the side and ignored it. I saw her sword rise to carve through Hakram's wrist and snapped my own, my last knife landing in my palm. I threw it at her head and the blade spun gracefully before being sliced cleanly through. The axe took her in the chest, breaking coloured mail but no skin. A boot to the stomach pushed the orc back, but he was still growing stronger. It did not slow him for long, and in the moment where the princess stood on only one leg Archer's longknives struck. The two blades came from opposite directions, one for the knee and the other for the neck. Without missing a beat Princess Sulia jumped and lay herself flat, strikes passing above and beneath her. She twisted sharply and a boot to the face shattered Archer's chin as she was sent sprawling to the floor.

Breath caught in my throat, I adjusted my wrist and pumped the entire arm full of my Name. I hit her at rib-height, the strength of the blow sending mail rings flying, and she smashed into the ground hard enough the earth dented. Her eyes turned gold-red, the heat grew, and Apprentice finally finished casting. Twenty-three sigils of blue light came into being above the princess with a loud hum, though not loud enough to drown out her pained groan. Heat shimmered around her and one of the sigils popped. I



glanced at Adjutant, panting. The skin that had healed was beginning to flake off, the burns returning if not as grave as before. Whatever power had possessed him was gone, though. Archer was back on her feet, but her lower face was one large and bloody bruise. Another three sigils popped. We didn't have much longer left.

"Oh, *oh*," Apprentice said, watching the struggling fae with wide eyes. "I was wrong, fundamentally wrong."

Shit. That did not look good at all. The bespectacled mage laughed, looking utterly crazed.

"It cannot be quantified," he muttered. "The method was erroneous from the onset. It is all made of the same building blocs, and those blocs are a *figment*. Mysteries, miracles of smoke and mirrors. The godhead is not behind boundaries, it is a *trick of perspective*."

Power rippled across his frame, his eyes glinting with a light that had a shiver going up my spine. One of the sigils formed again, though it popped moments later.

"Apprentice," I said carefully, and he interrupted.

"No no no," he laughed. "Not that. Not anymore. Hierophant. Usher of mysteries. Vivisector of miracles."

Was that what this was? A transition in the making?

"You are a god, yes?" he smiled at the Princess of High Noon, pushing up his glasses. "*Show me a miracle, then.*"

He waved his arm carelessly and Archer's jaw set itself back together with a loud crack. Fingers clutching something only he could see, the Hierophant brought his hands down. The sigils glowed so bright I had to shut my eyes in pain. *Like a star being born*. For all that, the words that drifted to my ears were calm.

"Everything burns," the Princess of High Noon whispered.

Arcadia broke. The brightness passed, and I opened my eyes to a world of endless ashes. I'd called on something of the same breed, when defeating the Count of Olden Oak, but it had been nothing but a drop to this ocean. Princess Sulia stood with restored wings, hair of flame and eyes that burned with something *more*. Above her raised hands hovered the sun. I could feel myself buckle from the pressure alone, my hair smouldering against my sweat-soaked scalp. Masego's spectacles shattered in his eyes and he screamed. Hakram wavered, then fell to his knees. The burns from earlier were spreading across his face. Archer's hands shook like leaves until she stabbed a longknife into her leg, the pain

allowing her to not be swept away by the weight bearing down on all of us.

"You may feel honoured," Princess Sulia said. "I have ever only called on this to bring an end to Winter. The four of you will be the first ashes on this field formed of Creation."

"You're wrong," I croaked.

"Will you try to take the sun from me, Duchess?" she said, amused. "You will burn, one way or another."

She was right, of course. If I tried using Take I'd die before I finished speaking the word. I was the Squire, after all. No role stood behind me in this. But I'd meant it, when I'd told her I wasn't her opponent.

"Not that," I grinned, all teeth and malice. "There's not four of us."

Behind the Princess of High Noon a woman appeared, short-haired with blue-grey eyes. She wore loose leathers and her face was red with sweat.

"Yoink," the Thief said, and stole the sun.

## Chapter 32: Close

*"Oh, on most days we lose. But once in a while, just once, it works. And those moments of perfect clarity where all the world is in the palm of your hand, a hundred thousand middling minds made into flawless assembly by your will? Those are worth all the rest."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

Well, we weren't all going to die. That was nice. If my mouthing off had been followed by Thief failing to steal the sun, I would have been *real* embarrassed before I got my fool ass killed. Wasn't exactly enthusiastic about a heroine with shaky allegiances getting to shove the – possibly, I wasn't sure exactly how this worked – literal sun in her knapsack, but it did beat dying horribly. So, you know, I was willing to chalk up that one as a win. The skin of Thief's hand was cracking and black by the time the orb of fire disappeared, even though she'd never touched it at all, but away it went. The moment it was gone, Sulia *screamed*. I imagined it was a lot like losing an aspect, and when Masego had cut out mine the process had been excruciating. She collapsed to her knees and the lights went out. The not-world we were in began to collapse, wrinkling on itself, but I was having none of that. Now, if I'd pit my power against the Princess of High Noon she would have crushed me effortlessly and then maybe allowed me a moment to contemplate the sheer

stupidity of my actions before ripping out my spine. This wasn't a fight, though. Power was leaving her like a leaking sieve, and even though I suspected that even whatever was left at the end would be enough for her to beat us again I wasn't going to give her the opportunity to get her shit together.

"Fall," I said.

It hadn't been dark on the ashy plain, not exactly. It'd been not so much darkness as the absence of light. My power filled the endless expanse, propping it up and claiming the framework for itself. I saw my companions shiver in the sudden cold, now nothing more than shaded silhouettes in boundless dark. The night sky above us was without stars, but it didn't feel like anything was missing. *A sky from before there were stars*, I thought. In here, whatever this place was, my will was the only one that mattered. Masego spoke a word, but there was only silence here. Silence, cold and weight. I turned my eyes to the Princess of High Noon, saw her frame light up with steam as my aspect slowly smothered the power of Summer inside her. She fought it harder than the Count of Olden Oak had, slowing down the process to a crawl. Letting out a long breath, I closed my eyes and sharpened my mind. Black had first taught me the exercise when I'd begun to learn the sword, but I'd only understood its true worth when I came fully into my Name. My mind became as a blade, the way I would when I formed a spear of shadows, but I let myself fall deeper into the process. Distractions and stray fought fell away. Doubts were scoured clean until nothing was left but pure, sharp intent.

With a clear and resounding snap, the Princess of High Noon froze.

I opened my eyes and released the night. After the utter silence that had preceded them, the noises of the battlefield were deafening. A wave of exhaustion nearly toppled me, though it did not scatter my wits enough for it to escape my notice that my blood flow had slowed. A few exertions away from it to start turning into red sludge, if I was lucky. I was out of the game for hours, maybe days. *But I'm not done as long as I can speak.*

"Masego," I rasped. "Bind her."

Sulia wasn't dead, oh no. When I'd made the decision of fighting here in Arcadia, even with all the odds I'd stacked in my favour, I'd hesitated for one reason. The losses I would incur had to be made worth it by a greater gain. Bleeding Summer alone was not enough to drive me to make a gambit like that, not with what I was putting on the line. There were major liabilities to fighting the fae in Creation, of course, but that in and of itself wasn't a reason to fight them in Arcadia instead. The risks taken by giving battle in Summer were too high to justify the decision with just that. But then I'd stopped thinking of this battle as a

battle alone, and placed it in the context of a campaign. There would be a final clash between my forces and the Summer Court, that much was certain in my eyes. And given that any advantage of mobility I had through my portals the fae had as well but better, when I returned to Creation there was no real way for me to dictate where that last clash happened. Considering the Legions were at their best on prepared grounds and anything but our best might just come short, that was not a recipe for victory. I'd understood that I needed something to force their hand, and that was why my soldiers and my allies were now dying on this unearthly field.

The Princess of High Noon was my leverage, and I'd not understood exactly how strong that leverage would be until only two royal fae had come to stand for Summer. There should have been three, which likely meant the Diabolist had gotten rid of one for me. I'd give this to Akua Sahelian: she was a horrid, cold-blooded and treacherous monster but when she put it all on the line she could slug it with the best of them. I was still going to stab her repeatedly and burn the corpse twice, of course, but I could respect the strength if not how she got it and how she used it. Two royals meant there were two people left to lead the armies of Summer. If the Prince of Nightfall killed his opponent, and I believed he could, that left the Queen of Summer as the only heavy hitter in her court. She wouldn't be able to let that stand, not with Nightfall and a princess left to back the King of Winter. If the other court turned its eyes on her, and it was in their nature to do so, then she'd lose that fight and badly. With Sulia back at her side, she could *maybe* scrap out a draw. She needed the Princess of High Noon back, and needed her badly.

So if I dragged Sulia back to Creation, bound and gagged? Then the Queen of Summer could only come to take her back or face destruction. My bet was she'd come with her entire army, where I wanted and when I wanted. I honestly couldn't think of another way to bring the war to a close in the next three months and some that remained of the time the Winter King had given me, and so here we were.

Hierophant, for though the change was young already I could no longer think of him by his old Name, did not immediately reply. Over his palm hovered the shards that had once been his spectacles, and though the enchantments on them were gone there was something a great deal more dangerous to be glimpsed in them now. The last thing they'd witnessed was the Summer sun in the fullness of its glory, and that light was still alive in the glass. It might never leave. Masego left the shards hovering in the air, weaving arcane patterns, and lightly touched his eyes. He could no longer see through them, I realized. He'd glimpsed a miracle and the miracle had burned away his sight. The dark-skinned mage smiled strangely, and then his fingers dug into his face. With a scream he ripped out his eyes, blood trickling down

his face as the glass shards broke again and again until they were nothing but small gains. Forming into two orbs, they set themselves into his eye cavities. There was a shimmer of heat and the blood turned to red vapour as dull glass eyes replaced the ones in his hand.

"The whole Hierophant thing was kind of attractive, until you did that," Archer said. "Way to ruin it."

"It was a fair trade," Masego said, voice pensive.

The bloody eyes disappeared without need for even a gesture, whisked out into the pocket dimension where he kept his tools.

"Seven pillars hold up the sky," he said peacefully.

There was a cadence to it, the hint of an incantation. Seven wooden pillars formed around the fallen Princess Sulia, looking distinctly physical. My knowledge of sorcery was limited, but even I knew the most traditional limits of what a mage could do. It was the kind of thing that was useful to know when killing a caster, and since Diabolist was one I'd made sure to learn at least the broad strokes. It was possible to turn power into material substance, but the draw should have been *massive*. Comparable with teleportation, and the only people who'd ever managed that were the Miezans. Masego seemed to have done it casually, and did not look winded in the slightest. Like he'd just ignored a law. Gods, what had he turned into?

"Four cardinals, one meridian," he said. "The wheel unbroken, spokes that are not. Thou shall not leave the circle."

Four runes appeared around the fae, linked by a circle of pale light. The ice shattered but Sulia hung in the air, faintly conscious yet unable to move. I helped up Hakram from where he was still kneeling, eyes closed and breathing irregularly. He leaned heavily on me, which almost saw the both of us toppling to the ground until Archer caught his other side and steadied us.

"Careful there, big guy," she said. "This isn't the place to take a nap, though I salute your attitude."

The orc cleared his throat, but did not say anything. He was in even worse state than I was. I looked for Thief, but she was gone again. Not much about the aftermath, that one. The disappearing act wasn't so much mysterious as it was a constant irritant. I'd been known to be, uh, less than polite on occasion but at least I didn't leave in the middle of things. I felt the gaze on me before the entity it belonged to deigned to land. The Prince of Nightfall ignored us entirely, touching the ground by the Princess of High Noon and studying her with a harsh smile.

"Oh, Sulia," he murmured. "The sheer indignity. You'd have been furious it if it was one of us, but *mortals*? No amount of lives will allow you to wipe that shame away."

"You killed your prince?" I asked.

He turned to me, single eye shining with amusement.

"Very much so," he said. "If the end ever comes, he will still be flinching when we next meet."

"We need to break the army," I said. "Quickly. My troops are going to begin evacuation as soon as I send the order."

"There is nowhere she will not follow you, with Sulia in your hands," he said. "You lack not for boldness. I wonder if I should be flattered, that your domain resembles mine so closely."

"Ah," I said, nodding as if I had any idea what he was talking about.

"Your third aspect," Masego said, long accustomed to my wiles. "It is... more."

The raven-haired man glanced at the braided mage, inclining his head by the barest fraction.

"You have good eyes, for one of your kind," he said.

The Hierophant inclined his head in return, accepting the compliment wordlessly. The Prince of Nightfall breathed in deeply, as if he was savouring the heat, and looked up at the sky. It was still day, I saw. The light still shone. Yet there was no sun. That might be a problem. What exactly had Thief gotten her sticky fingers on?

"I will lend a vassal to escort you back to your lines, keeping to the spirit of our bargain," the prince said. "Do not forget your end."

How the Hells I was going to manage to pay the price he'd demanded for his assistance was a headache for another day, I decided. I looked at the battle lines and saw Summer was wavering. They'd felt the defeats that had happened on a deeper level, and it was costing them something.

"We've won," I said.

"The Duke of Green Orchards will call retreat within the hour," the fae agreed. "You killed his sister earlier, and they have no champion left to match me."

I looked west, to the hill, and saw the silhouette had yet to move. The Prince of Nightfall followed my gaze, single eye narrowing.

"If she is not gone by dawn tomorrow, I will have my due," he said.

I looked at him, then shrugged.

"Good luck. Gods know you'll need it."

—

We pursued the enemy when they retreated, but not far and not for long. I wanted Summer thinned of all the meat I could manage before we fought them again, but I was well aware that the moment Princess Sulia had been defeated an hourglass had been flipped and we wouldn't survive the last grains running out. Masego said that, in the worst case, she could turn a journey of several days into one that would take her until nightfall. We should be able to manage that. Juniper only sent two thousand regulars across before closing the gate, the flanking force they represented taking its toll before the fae host managed to extricate itself. Mostly green recruits, I noticed. It was so very typical of my general to use a battle in goddamned Arcadia to blood her fresh recruits that I couldn't help but smile. Juniper was Juniper. I was pretty sure if we ever invaded one of the Hells she'd just treat it as tempering exercise. The knights and the Winter fae did most of the hard work in running down whatever soldiers of Summer were cut off from the retreating host, and though it was only a rough estimate Marshal Ranker sent me an officer with her best read on the casualties. On our side, nearly six thousand. Nauk's two thousand men at the beginning of the campaign had been whittled down to a bare five hundred. Most of the rest were Deorai the regulars and fewer legionaries, though the Watch had allegedly lost a tenth of their number.

Summer, by Ranker's estimates, had lost around twenty thousand of the sixty they'd brought to the plains. Among those, over a third of the ten thousand the golden fae who'd very nearly wiped out Nauk's jesha had died. They'd suffered more from the two blasts that had been extracted from the Duchess of Restless Zephyr than mortal blades, apparently. I wasn't looking forward to another scrap with the golden ones, and fully intended on a sit-down with the Hellhound over the subject. This had been a victory, if a bloody one. We'd traded losses at over thrice dead for every one of ours. Winter, though, had not made out so well. Twenty thousand had been led here by the Prince of Nightfall, but only nine thousand would leave the field. Their cavalry was good as done, while the winged knights of Summer still had over half their numbers, and they'd lost one of the three royals directly under the King in the battle. I wasn't all that broken up about

it, to be honest. A Winter that was better off than Summer but still weakened was very much to my advantage.

Our wounded had been sent through first, the slow work accelerated when Masego crossed into Creation with the Princess of High Noon and then used our other aristocratic prisoner to forge a second gate that our men could use to evacuate. I gave Duchess Kegan leave to use that one to get her people out at her own leisure, getting the Legions through the one at behind the palisades. It was quicker this time around, for a variety of reasons. One more gate, lesser numbers and our officers had managed the logistics of this before. It was past noon when the last few hundred began to file through, and sitting on the bloody grass I let out a sigh of relief. Masego was lying down on my left, dull glass eyes thankfully hidden by his closed eyelids. It would be a while before I got used to those. He had to be on this side to close the gate he'd crafted, he'd told, me and I'd decided to remain with him so he wouldn't get distracted.

"The Queen won't be able to follow us for some time," the mage said. "There are difficulties, to something that powerful crossing in Creation. They weren't meant to."

"How long is some time?" I said. "A week, a month, a year? I can't have her stuck here for too long. Not if I'm to win this war decisively."

"No more than a month," Hierophant said. "She would not be able to stay for much longer than that, either. She's too deeply intertwined with Aine."

"I can work with a month," I grunted. "I'll need around that long to have everything in place for our second tilt."

"It won't be anything like today," Masego warned.

"They always get better, the second time around," I agreed softly.

The others had already gone across. I'd told Archer I didn't mind if she wanted to go have a chat with her teacher, but the other woman had shuddered and muttered something about *hunting eyes*. She did enjoy her dramatics. Ranger, if that was really her, still hadn't moved. Might have been she just came to have a look? Regardless, as long as it wasn't made my problem I was glad to wash my hands clean of the whole thing. Nothing good came out of meddling in the affairs of Calamities, even former ones. I sighed, then hoisted myself back up onto my feet. Gods, I was going to be more bruise than woman tomorrow. I offered Masego a hand, but saw his fingers were tracing the grass. Casting? No, he was trying to move the green strands. And failing.

"Oh fuck," I whispered.



I looked ahead, to the gates. Maybe a little more than a hundred people left between the two of them, but none of them were moving. Frozen like statues. I'd seen something like this before, shortly before getting my heart ripped out.

"She's here," the Hierophant said, rising unsteadily.

The difference in light was so subtle I almost missed it: it was the shadows that gave it away. Even with the sun missing, the light had been cast as if coming from the something that no longer existed. Now, though, the angle was different. It all came from above. Hand shaking, I looked up. There was no sky. Only an ocean of golden flames, as far as the eye could see. Masego began murmuring softly and with a sound like a gong transparent wards formed around the soldiers still leaving. They resumed their movement for a heartbeat, until the wards shattered.

"You said we should have had until nightfall," I said. "Aine is days away, and she wasn't moving."

"No, not moving. She was *casting*," Masego said, regretful. "Time has been suspended across all of Summer."

I cast a panicked look at my soldiers. Shit, at the *gates*. The Queen might be able to cross through those. If she did, we were done. All our armies wiped in moments.

"I have never done this before," a soft voice said, awed.

In front of us stood a young girl. She couldn't have been more than fourteen. Her skin was tanned, but not like a Taghreb or the people of the Free Cities. Like a farmer, and her hands held the calluses of one who tilled fields. Her hair was a mass of golden curls, let loose without styling. She wasn't beautiful, the way some fae were. If I would have taken her for some farmer's daughter, with those broad shoulders and solid muscles. Her eyes were brown, unremarkable, and when she smiled at us her cheeks dimpled.

"Is this what he saw in you?" the Queen of Summer wondered. "You change the patterns."

My mouth was dry. I had the itch to cough, but my body was still and beyond my control.

"It is not enough," she said after a moment, and the sorrow on her face was heartbreaking. "The story will correct itself. All you represent is delay. How tired he must be, to embrace this."

She sighed, then peered at us.

"There are five of you," she said.

I could not even nod.

"Born under cursed stars," she told us gently. "You most of all, Catherine Foundling. The five of you would be woe unto all you behold."

She had no weapon in her hand but I had not felt this terrified in a very, very long time.

"I will spare you this," she said. "I'm sorry. It's all I can do for you. Summer is not kind."

Hierophant's hand moved, but the Queen glanced at him and it stopped.

"If you'd had a few years, Masego," she said. "You have not seen enough."

Her hand rose and the sky fell. *Now. Come on, now is when you come. She has to be why you're here.* I'd never heard anything more beautiful than the sound of a sword clearing the scabbard. The sky split in half and Ranger stood between us as if she had always been there. My hands were shaking, and though I abhorred the weakness it stood for I was so relieved I could move again I almost didn't care.

"It was the Chancellor, who named us the Calamities," the hooded woman said, a single sword in hand. "The man always had a way with words. 'You are a calamity to friend and foe alike'. Only ever screamed when he died, though. I guess it's hard to be witty when getting drawn and quartered."

She hummed.

"The Woe," Ranger said, mulling over the word. "Too broad a mantle for you five now, but you'll grow into it."

"I have no quarrel with you, Lady of the Lake," the Queen of Summer said, brow creased slightly.

Just the sight of it made me want to comfort her, even remembering she'd just tried to kill us.

"Run along, kids," Ranger said, face hooded by shadow save for the sharp grin on her face. "Once is all you get from me."

"We could help you," I croaked.

The blade did not move, and neither did the hand that held it. And yet for a heartbeat I felt like my throat had been cut, like blood was gushing out. The intent had been so strong it had almost become a fact.

"I dislike ignoring my impulses," Ranger said casually. "So do not suggest that again. He would be angry, if I killed you, but we've been angry before. It passes."

"My soldiers," I said, knowing I was testing death but unwilling to leave them behind.

The Calamity shrugged carelessly.

"What are they to me?"

She couldn't have... no, not even Black would. But I looked behind me, and there was no denying the truth. The Deoraithe, the legionaries. Nothing left but ashes. She had not protected them. Only the two of us.

"You will not leave," the Queen of Summer said.

She spoke the words easily, and still I felt my bones creak under the weight. Ranger unsheathed her second sword and the pressure vanished.

"I looked for you, in Aine," the Calamity said.

"It would have been a meaningless fight," the Queen said.

The Named had already ceased to pay attention to us, I saw. She'd given us our chance, and that was all she felt she owed.

"So you had me running through a maze instead," Ranger snorted. "Cute. No maze here now, though. Too far from your throne."

"This strife is unnecessary," the Queen insisted, as if she couldn't possibly understand why this matter was still spoken of at all.

"I don't think we've ever been properly introduced," the Calamity laughed. "I am the Ranger. I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, for you qualify."

We fled, through the ashes of men who'd fought for me not hours ago. The gates closed, and the last of Arcadia I saw was a lone silhouette standing in a storm of flame. We'd won today, I told myself. Even with how it had ended.

I should have gotten used to that bitter taste in my mouth by now.

## **Villainous Interlude: Cadenza**

*"Taxes. Taxes and triplicate forms."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, upon being asked what powerful sorceries he would use to humble the High Lords

Warlock had eyes on it from the beginning.

Not scrying, for that could be traced, but delayed relays that caught images at regular intervals. Wekesa had formed enough alternating way stations that while it was possible to follow the trail back to the beginning, it would take months at a flat minimum. What Amadeus saw was puzzling, at the start. Procer sent decoys caravans, armed to the teeth, but those were seen through easily. He sent Sabah to hit the lone carts using lesser known paths, and these carried the ingots of silver and gold that were being fed to Nicae. The two first true caravans were ambushed and seized at the same location, which led him to a possible answer: consecrated grounds. By having blood spilled at the same hands at the same place, ritual weight could be crafted. That might signify his initial notion that this was a trap put in place by the Tyrant was correct, because the heroes under the White Knight would not lower themselves to use blood magic in this manner. Not with a man sworn to the Choir of Judgement at their head. Then the third caravan used a different path, and blood was spilled in a different location. He had, evidently, been incorrect. Reassessment was needed. Scribe had begun placing agents in the ranks of the Helikean army long before the war between League members began, and he turned to her for clarification.

"He caught my agents," Eudokia said.

"All of them?" Black frowned.

"Yes," she confirmed. "They still serve as soldiers, but any information they try to pass gets replaced by the words to a Helikean drinking song about a shepherdess and her three husbands."

The Tyrant's doing, then. The boy did like to pretend he has a sense of humour.

"Extraction?" he said.

"Even removing the soul from the bodies doesn't sidestep the issue," she said.

Name application, then, possibly an aspect. There were few sorceries in existence that could truly affect a soul in a manner more complex than cutting out parts and outside the Empire that branch of magic was not often studied. Infiltration of Helike was a resource sink, then, though one he might revisit should he need to busy the villain for a span of time. Scribe turned her focus to Nicae, at his instruction, and continued the other task he had assigned her. The fourth caravan took a different route again, and this contradicted his read of the matter. *If the intent is opaque, change the perspective.* Amadeus marked the locations on the map, and had Wekesa study them.

"If the next one dies here, there's an arcane pattern being formed," Warlock said, tapping a cattle path that would begin to sketch out a circle from a bird's eye view.

It was not the location where the fifth caravan was destroyed. Repetition in the face of failure, Amadeus believed, indicated either incompetence or that what was perceived as 'success' by the beholder was not the objective. The sixth caravan passed through the initial route, and he ordered Captain to let it pass. It was possible that the later caravans had been a smokescreen to draw him away from his first thought, that of consecrated grounds.

"If that's what they're doing his mages are botching it," Wekesa said. "He can still consecrate the grounds to Below like that, but if he doesn't maintain a regular pattern then it'll be so weak it'll be useless. There's a reason the old crowd uses prisoner sacrifices for the effect, it allows you to control the alignments."

"The drivers have been women more than men," Amadeus said.

"There's rituals that take gender into consideration, but not this kind," Warlock said. "And they're exceedingly imprecise, so there's no way they could take out Sabah. It's too fluid a concept to be used as a solid anchor."

That was usually the way, with cultural mores. *If the intent is opaque, change the perspective.* Neither consecration nor geographic location. Temporal placement? The hours where the caravans had been taken formed no useful arcane pattern, according to Warlock. Using the date by the Imperial calendar led to a dead end, but then outside Praes it was rarely used. The Free Cities counted the years from the founding of the League, but that was another dead end. The ancestral calendar of Helike was similarly useless.

"Keteran Calendar," Warlock finally murmured, peering at a table full of opened books with a cup of wine in hand.

Amadeus adjusted his thinking, bringing the corresponding numbers to mind. Nothing that seemed relevant to him.

"Take out the second killing," Wekesa said. "Then instead of using only the date as is, subtract using the year Sabah was born."

The Black Knight closed his eyes, assembled the answers.

"Spell formula," he said. "But this is ridiculously indirect."

Warlock ignored him, scribbling ink on parchment and translating numbers to runes then speculated requirements from there.

"It's not just that," the Soninke grimaced.

"It would take thousands to create even a minor effect with so weak a sympathetic link," Amadeus pointed out.

"The effect itself is how I know we're on the wrong track," Wekesa sighed. "Look, this is a projection of the illusion that would be formed if this formula was empowered."

Warlock tapped the table once, and spell light glowed softly. In front of them, a hand was rotating in the air. Only the middle finger was raised.

"This is the Tyrant's play, then," the green-eyed man murmured. "That as good as confirms it."

The combination of childish insult and advanced understanding of spellcrafting mechanics was telling. That a secondary pattern inserted into the primary one purely for the sake of the taunt was there at all was somewhat worrying. Amadeus had not been under the impression the Tyrant had mages this talented as his disposal, or such understanding himself. Another change of perspective was needed, but before that more information must be obtained. In a calculated risk, he sent Sabah to sack the seventh caravan. A different route, once more. Amadeus drank, watched the flames and thought. Eudokia came with her reports when the moon was high.

"The magisters were open to negotiations to have their army returned to them," Scribe said.

"But?" the Duni prompted.

"Distraction," she said. "They've already secured other means to accomplish this."

The Tyrant. That he'd bothered to involve Stygia at all spoke volumes: they had a role to play in his ultimate intent.

"He rules Helike," the Black Knight said. "Occupies Atalante. Has a representative from Bellerophon, struck a pact with Stygia and prepares to siege Nicae."

Eudokia nodded without a word. She'd understood the order perfectly.

"The Bard?" he said.

"Still gathering," she replied, and disappeared into the night.

Amadeus closed his eyes and thought. Eliminating theories one after another would take too long, and the caravans could not simply be allowed to pass. The longer Nicae could afford to import supplies from Ashur, the longer the siege stretched out

and the longer he would have to remain. He could not afford to stay away from the Empire for that long, not with the... colourful rumours about what was currently unfolding there. To find the pattern, then, he would need to begin with the individual or individuals that had crafted it. Necessary common factor?

*Understanding of High Arcana.* Nothing less could be used for a ritual of this class. Still and silent, Amadeus counted. He had known seventeen individuals capable of using High Arcana, in his life. He brought up every single conversation he'd had with one of them, and sought commonalities in perspective. In the back of his mind, the gears ground. Too shallow a pool of information. He repeated the exercise, adding everything he'd ever read from an individual who cleared the condition to the process. Two days he stayed there, his companions knowing better than to disturb him. It was night again when he opened his eyes.

"Planar perception," he told no one at all.

The understanding of sorcery of that level led to a different understanding of Creation as well, one divorced from the material concerns that shaped his views. To Wekesa, for example, the lay of the land they both looked at was fundamentally different. Looking at the situation through the version of this filter he could construct, he found his answer. *Height*. No topographical map of the region accurate enough for his purposes could be obtained, which meant direct observation. Warlock handled it, putting together the images obtained through relays.

"You're right," Wekesa admitted. "If you look at the pattern using the height they were killed at instead of the location, I can recognize the shape."

"How many do they need?" he asked.

"Assuming I'm correct and the first killing was a decoy, four more," his old friend said.

"Nine in total," Amadeus said. "Thrice three. A killing stroke?"

"Offensive in nature, at the very least," Warlock said. "We stop shy of what they need?"

The Black Knight smiled, very mildly.

"No," he said. "I think not. They will get exactly what they need."

Eudokia found him as he ate for the first time in days, methodically replenishing his strength.

"An offer was made to the Secretariat," she said. "Penthes as well."

The pale-skinned man chewed thoughtfully.

"He aims to be Hierarch, then," he said.

How the Tyrant had managed to exert pressure on Bellerophon enough they would agree to this would have to be found investigated. Such a lever was too useful to be left solely in the boy's hands.

"Assuming he secures all the votes," Amadeus said. "Intent?"

"Broader games," Scribe suggested. "His methodology requires constant opposition."

That was a possibility, the green-eyed man thought. A straightforward one, however. That did not immediately disqualify it as a possible objective, but it was not a mark in its favour.

"Worst case scenario," Eudokia asked, changing the approach.

"Tenth crusade, involving the entirety of Hasenbach's coalition," Amadeus replied without missing a beat. "Dead King uninvolved. Chain of Hunger unable to exert strength. Drow situation unchanged."

"Kingdom Under?" Scribe said.

"In another expansion phase," the Black Knight reminded her. "They will profiteer through weapon trade, at most."

They'd left behind the question of what the Tyrant was after, and were instead studying what effect he could have on the Empire under the worst circumstances possible should he ascend to the position.

"He would be a destabilizing factor," Scribe said, and there was no greater insult in her eyes than what she had just uttered.

"One without the ability to grab land or hamper commerce outside affordable losses," Amadeus said. "By nature, even should he manage to align with Procer he will be damaging to them."

*Not worth directly opposing in this*, the verdict was. Not unless other information surfaced that changed the forces in play.

"I've assembled an initial dossier," Eudokia said.

Amadeus raised an eyebrow.

"Different face, but she has been active in Procer," Scribe said.

"She's behind Hasenbach?" he asked.



If the Wandering Bard had enabled the First Prince to rise, the failure in intelligence that had resulted in him being unaware of this was... massive. It put everything he knew of the Proceran situation in question.

"No recorded contact," Eudokia said. "But she was in Rhenia."

The Black Knight was too old and far too removed from the boy he'd once been to let the dismay touch his face.

"The Augur," he said. "There could be indirect influence. Anything further back?"

"No link to the Troubadour or the Magnificent Minstrel," Scribe said. "But getting anything prior to the Conquest has been... difficult."

The records had been tinkered with, she meant.

"There's no precedent for an uninterrupted stream of consciousness," Amadeus said.

"Heavier inheritance," Scribe suggested.

Name dreams writ large. It was possible. Few things were not, when it came to Named.

"A line of Wandering Bards going back for centuries, advancing some collective purpose," he said. "That is... an issue. There must be limits."

"She has never intervened directly," Eudokia said, and he waved his hand in irritation.

They'd both known what. It was a staple of bardic Names, being able to influence the story but rarely change it with their own hands. Power only through fronts, never wielded personally.

"Has she ever been linked to anyone not Named?" Amadeus said.

Reluctantly, Scribe shook her head. Given the incomplete records at their disposal, she was unwilling to commit fully to that theory.

"When attached to the Lone Swordsman, she operated within his moral boundaries," Eudokia said.

Limits to her actions dictated to the story she was bound to and the nature of its heroes. Another theory to test.

"It's her blind spots we need to find," he said. "The majority of the threat she represents comes from her awareness of our movements."

Eudokia nodded. Amadeus frowned.

"Pick a target," he said. "Assassin is at your disposal. I cannot know."

"Risk margin?" she asked.

"I trust your judgement," he replied.

No more need be said. Sabah killed, four more times. But as skilled as the mages of the Tyrant were, they were not Warlock. A single strand of hair was placed in the centre of the runic circle, and the curse meant to kill Captain found another target. Usurpation was, after all, the essence of sorcery. After it was done, Wekesa complimented the ritual. It was, apparently, not derivative of Praesi work in the slightest though it had been designed under the shared Trismegistan theory of magic. Behind the tall walls of Nicae, the Ashen Priestess died screaming. There was no warning, and no saving her. The ritual had been performed to kill a Named much more physically able. Amadeus approved, when he learned of it. *Always kill the healer first.* Targeting the White Knight might not have succeeded, and of the others the Priestess was the most apt to tip the balance in a clash. Before dawn, every practitioner involved on the attempt on Sabah's life was dead. They left behind a note indicating they had taken their own lives out of guilt. Assassin's sense of humour had grown whimsical of late.

"Your reasoning?" Scribe asked, after.

"No hero was involved in the story until the very end," he said. "It was a struggle purely between villains."

"Ah," Eudokia said. "She can only see us when we stand opposed to her narrative?"

"Possibly," Amadeus frowned. "Otherwise she sacrificed a heroine for no visible gain."

"If she is bound by the White Knight's morality, she could not do so," Scribe said.

"Possibly," the green-eyed man repeated. "I am... unsettled, Eudokia."

Her eyes were still as ponds.

"The word for 'bard' we use comes from Old Miezán," he said. "Language has evolved, even in our lifetime."

"If the line were that ancient, there would be records," Scribe said. "Unless."

"Unless," Amadeus agreed softly.

Unless something was cleaning up behind them, be it their Role or the Gods Above. Such a direct intervention would allow similar direct meddling from the Gods Below, of course. Balance in spirit, if not in practice. Yet he could think of only one event in Calernian history that would qualify. *The creation of the Kingdom of the Dead*. Which preceded written history in Praes by centuries, by conservative estimate. If the line of 'Bards' was that old, the Heavens had been playing a longer game than any of them. The ramifications of that were beyond the scope of his understanding, a feeling he was unused to and did not particularly care for.

"It could be Triumphant," Eudokia said.

*Triumphant cost us so much more than we gained*. If she'd been the intervention of the Gods Below, they had let themselves be robbed by the opposition. Black closed his eyes.

"If she cannot be killed, she must be trapped," he said.

He felt Scribe nod. She sat at his side, close enough to touch but never quite getting there.

"You are tired," Eudokia said.

Innocuous words, but the deeper meaning was there.

"I am dying, I think," he murmured.

There was a long silence.

"If Catherine wields the knife, I will destroy her," she said, as if she was speaking of the weather. "And if I fail Hye will not."

Amadeus did not reply. If he'd been the kind of man to pray, he would have prayed then. But he was not, so instead the gears began to turn and he wondered how many of the people he loved he would have to kill, before it was all over.

## **Villainous Interlude: Thunder**

*"We have grown to mock Tyrants for they are mad but that is a very dangerous thing. A madman thinks the world other than what it is, and in a mortal that is a harmless thing. Not so in one who moulds Creation to their will, as all Named do."*

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Anaxares had been named a general, at the Tyrant's orders. Sixty-seven, the diplomat mused. He was now technically committing treason under sixty-seven different articles of Bellerophan law, and starting to wonder if he would reach a hundred before he died. His remains would be on trial for at least a decade, and he did not envy the Defender Against The People who drew the wrong

lot and was made to defend his rotting corpse. It seemed to few, to have grown from middling fifty counts of treason to over sixty when made to serve in a foreign army. The law codes were in need of revising. It should have landed him roughly in the eighties. The mere fact that no difference was made between officer grades was a glaring oversight, and if allowed a few moments to make a statement before the *kanenas* summarily executed him he would jot down a few notes on the matter.

"Pay attention, Bellerophon," General Basilia barked. "This is important."

Kairos' foremost commander was currently attempting to teach him the basics of war, as he would apparently be given command of five thousand men during the assault on the walls of Nicae. When Anaxares had asked the boy why, morbidly curious, he'd been answered only by off-putting giggles. Troubling.

"I will not. I am a diplomat in the service of the Republic," he said. "Anyone but the officers drawn by lot learning military tactics is illegal."

The woman glared at him, sceptical.

"Are you telling me your shithole of a city doesn't have career officers?" she asked.

*War Is Of The People, Served By The People And Ordered Only By The People.*

"That would be setting apart individuals from the rest," he said, somewhat offended on behalf of Bellerophon. "This learning can and should only be temporary, removed after it had seen lawful use."

"Gods, no wonder you fucks have never won a war," the general said, aghast.

Anaxares narrowed his eyes at the wicked foreign oligarch. It had been determined by the Will Of The People that enough draws counted as a victory, and therefore proof of the superiority of the Republic in all things. That this was factually incorrect by the standards of wider Calernia was irrelevant to the purposes of this conversation.

"Who do you even learn from?" Basilia asked.

"Bellerophon has secured the finest military manual in existence to train its officers," he replied.

"*Manners of War* by Tyrant Theodosius?" the general asked. "I suppose the *Ars Tactica* by the first Terribilis would be close enough."

*"A Hundred Victorious Strategies,"* Anaxares said.

Ah, that made sixty-eight. Leaking of military information to The Deceived Servant Of A Grasping Despot. General Basilia's lips twitched as if she was trying very hard not to weep or laugh.

"Isabella the Mad's book?" she asked, voice rough.

"She was the only one to ever defeat Theodosius on the field," the diplomat said.

"That's, uh, a very generous assessment of the Maddened Fields," General Basilia said, and tried to pass her convulsive laughter for a cough.

He sighed. Mockery, he thought, was the last refuge of those afraid of the First And Mightiest Of The Free Cities, May She Reign Forever.

"Well, at least you haven't learned any bad habits," she said. "You won't be on the first wave over the walls, anyway, if you listen to your commanders you should be fine."

"I will not," Anaxares said.

The woman frowned.

"I will actively attempt to hinder your victory, should I remain in a position of authority," he informed her serenely.

"I'll remove you from command," she threatened.

"Do so," he said. "Please."

Was there a lawful difference between having temporarily served in a foreign army and remaining in service? Ah, yes, the third amendment. Unfortunately it only applied after death, with the assumption being that any Bellerophan committing such treason would immediately be killed before trial could take place. Another area in need of clarification to be pointed out to the Republic.

"The Tyrant has his reasons," Basilia finally said. "He sees further than anyone else."

"He is drunk with power," Anaxares told her gently. "And quite possibly mad."

"They're all mad, diplomat," the woman said, smiling. "That's why they win. Theodosius took on the entire Principate at its peak and walked away the winner. That takes something stranger than courage. Oh, we have the finest army on Calernia don't get me wrong. We can handle thrice our number in what everyone else has

to field. But it's with a Tyrant on the throne that we shine, and it was the fortune of my life to be born under one."

Anaxares was not unaware of the blinders the Republic had set around his eyes, though he'd never seen the need to attempt to take them off. It was his first time, however, seeing the same thing on the face of someone not from Bellerophon. How strange, that they too could have faith in something greater. It took the diplomat tipping over a carafe of wine over three maps and wilfully misremembering the names of his commanders before the Helikean gave up in schooling him. Kairos sent for him, but when he entered the tent there was no sign of the Tyrant. Seven people stood stiffly under the silk panes, eyeing the embroidery with cold mistrust. And good reason. It was gold thread, a blatant misuse of wealth that should be in the hands of the people.

"Diplomat Anaxares," a woman said, tonelessly.

*Kanenas*. She was not even trying to hide it. The others all had that muted look on their faces that would have betrayed their function as well, had the Bellerophon been traitorous enough to attempt to find such a thing out. Anaxares did not bow, for that was a foreign flourish judiciously disposed of by the Republic. All men were equal, even with those who could kill him with a thought.

"I have committed treason on sixty-eight counts," he said, and calmly listed them.

The longer he spoke, the more the tension left his shoulders. It was not that Anaxares had ever expected to live through any of this, or even dedicated a great deal of thought to the matter. It was, after all, out of his hands. But it was a relief, that this strange affair finally be closed. That his fate had been left dangling had been a burr in his boots, an irritant. His existence and the contradiction it represented to the truth of Bellerophon should not have been left so long unanswered.

"If the Republic is willing to provide ink and parchment, I have comments to submit to the eyes of the people for after my execution," he said.

He'd never considered using Helikean tools. No proper Bellerophon would have read anything written with them. The seven *kanenas* studied him.

"Your pending execution has been suspended by vote," a man said. "Your services to the people have made you a Person of Value."

The diplomat watched the seven other people in the tent. They stared back, unblinking. Something rose inside of him as the silence continued, something he had not felt in a very long time. He'd thought the years had scoured it out of him, but perhaps

that had been vanity. It was not hope, of course. He had no use for that. It was *anger*. Harsh, unforgiving fury. How dare they? How dare they turn on what they should be, on everything they should stand for?

"No," he hissed. "This is *unacceptable*."

"This committee has been empowered to record and respond to your words," the woman who'd spoken earlier replied flatly.

"There is no such thing as Person of Value," Anaxares snarled. "If the people have decreed this, the people are *wrong* and in need of purging. We are a Republic of *laws*. I have broken these laws. I must be executed according to them."

"To go against the Will of the People is treason," another woman said.

"Then execute me, by all the Gods," he shouted. "The people have committed treason against the Republic through this vote. This is how he *wins*, you fools. By bending what we are. It only needs to happen once and everything we've built is stained."

Eyes hard, he stared them down.

"We are the Republic of Bellerophon," he said through gritted teeth. "We do not compromise. We do not make *exceptions*. I will slit my own throat before allowing this."

"Correct," the man said.

"Correct," another man said, and a woman with him.

"Treason," the woman from earlier replied.

The air in the tent grew thick with sorcery as all seven *kanenas* went still. Something broke with a sickening crunch behind the face of the three who'd agreed with him. Anaxares did not look as the bodies dropped. Citizens did not get involved in the debates of the *kanenas*, or the grisly ends they inevitably came to.

"You are forbidden to commit suicide by law," the woman said. "And to wilfully take actions that will result in your death as well."

"You can't do this," Anaxares said.

He was genuinely afraid for the first time since boyhood. This... Gods, what was this? It was wrong, all wrong, something had broken and he needed to **Mend** it.

"We do nothing, diplomat," a man said. "The People Have Spoken."

They left him there, shivering in his own sweat. His hands shook and he had to sit for his legs would not longer bear the weight of him. Nightfall was coming, and with it the assault on Nicaw. The armies were gathered, but he cared nothing for it. Yet he would have to lead the soldiers, for if he did not the Tyrant might decide to kill him and he was forbidden by law to chance this. The boy. The boy was behind this, one way or another. Kairos was waiting for him on a throne that overlooked the walls, all grey stone with a dozen gargoyles fanning him and feeding him grapes. He had a cup in hand, though not of wine. Juice of some sort.

"What did you do," Anaxares demanded. "*What did you do?*"

The Tyrant of Helike laughed, laughed with his red eye shining and his weak arm clutching at his robes like claws.

"Oh yes," Kairos Theodosian murmured. "You'll do nicely."

"You've tainted us," the diplomat said.

"I gave them what they wanted most, deep down," the Tyrant said. "Under all the laws and the lies."

A gargoyle waddled up to him, stone wings folded over its back, and offered a wineskin. The Bellerophan saw it too well. His eyesight should not be this good, all these minute fractures in the bespelled rock should never have been noticeable. That realization brought exhaustion with it that had him half-toppling on the platform the throne was set on. He took the skin and drank deep, drowning and drowned.

"Would you like to hear a story, Anaxares?" the Tyrant asked. "It's a thing of beauty, this one."

"This must be unmade," the diplomat begged.

"Oh, it's too late for that," Kairos smiled. "Much, much too late. This story, my dearest friend, is about three people."

Anaxares' hands were no longer shaking, his body numb at the horror of what was happening.

"The first is a monster," Kairos said. "She's not like the others monsters, though. She has no face and as many lives as there are stars, and behind those veils only one single burning desire. It's a thing I can see, you know. What people **Wish**. And when I look at her, what I see is *glorious*."

"The Wandering Bard," Anaxares croaked.

"Now, this monster she has plans and plans and plans," the Tyrant sighed admiringly. "So many irons and so many fires. She doesn't care about any of us, when it comes down to it. All she looks at



is the line in the sand that's just a bit above the reach of high tide, and we can't have that now can we? She's not real picky about what she'll use to wipe it away, practical creature that she is."

Kairos leaned closer, grinning widely.

"Let me tell you a secret, my friend," he whispered. "She's already won. The opposition was watching the wrong fire the whole time, and the intricacy of the trap is *exquisite*. She made the kill without them ever seeing her."

"She's losing," Anaxares said. "The Calamities killed one of her heroes with your own sorcery."

"No no no," the Tyrant said. "You're looking at it all wrong. Even if my pretty little mages had been untroubled, the Beast would have survived. The Healer should have too, life split in half with her sister. A touching story of sisterly love, if you care for that sort of thing. She didn't because she was a *sacrifice*. Her weight was stolen, because there was another use for it. With nothing you can only trade for nothing."

"Then you are a pawn as well," the diplomat said. "In the Bard's game."

"Funny thing, control," the boy mused. "Everybody thinks they have it. Because they follow Fate or fight it, because they see the lines or make them. No one is in control, Anaxares. Not even the Gods, otherwise what would be the point of Creation? We're not the answer, we're the question. The book even says so."

The cripple hacked out a laugh, patting himself.

"She thinks I made you to kill me," Kairos said. "She's wrong, my dearest bosom companion. I'm not some Praesi of the old breed, oh no. I have more unusual ambitions. But here I am, getting ahead of myself. We have a story, yes? The second person is not a person at all. He is a *thing*."

The hate and contempt in the boy's voice had an almost physical weight to it.

"He thinks he's a person and that's the most disgusting part," the Tyrant smiled. "Cogs and wheels and he started out thinking it was about being right, about being fair, but it hasn't been like that in a long time. He just wants to win, but it's a kind of victory that means nothing at all. That poor, blind pile of cogs."

Kairos tittered.

"He thinks what runs him is reason but that is a conceit," the Tyrant said gleefully. "That will sting, when the lie is stripped away. He thinks he's above pride, you see, but that's about all that's left of him because he thinks everyone lives by his rules, Anaxares. Even if the ends aren't the same, he thinks the *means* are."

The boy's good hand rose, fingers walking the arm of the throne like some small nimble creature. The odd-eyed villain snapped his fist shut instead of walking it off.

"Just like that," he said. "Plot and plan and seize a crown at the end, even if this one isn't really a crown. More like an agreement, and you know I have a weakness for those. The old Emperors, they got it. That the Empire was the tool, not the aim. But in his little head Praes is the centre of the world, and as long as he thinks like that Aoede is going to whip him again and again, if you'll forgive my language."

"She's going to kill him," the diplomat said.

"Of course not, my beauteous blooming flower," the Tyrant tutted. "Nothing so crass. She's going to *hurt* him. And when the cold thing turns into a wounded animal, well, that's when he starts making mistakes."

"And the third person is you," Anaxares said. "Pulling all the strings."

Kairos turned to him then, and the smile on his face was one of pure and childlike joy. The Bellerophan had never seen anything half so terrifying.

"Gotcha," he said, like a child pulling a prank.

The cripple shivered under the setting sun, his face almost feverish.

"I heard a story about one of the first kings of Helike, once," he said. "His father had gathered a great menagerie of animals, it goes. Peacocks and great lizards, gazelles and aurochs from all over Calernia and beyond. And one lion as well, brought in as a cub. It lived in a cage all its life, fed choice cuts of meat meant behind bars. So the first thing that king did, when he took the throne, was open all the doors."

The Tyrant hummed.

"I heard a lot of reasons why he might have done that," the odd-eyed boy said. "Revenge on a father who cared more for animals than him, getting rid of expensive frivolity and even because he believed caging animals was wrong. I think, though, that I understand him. Just a little."

Kairos leaned forward.

"I think what he wanted was to see if a lion was still a lion, having lived in a cage all its life," he confided. "I think he just... wanted to see what would happen."

"What did?" Anaxares asked, tone rough.

"The lion slaughtered them all," the Tyrant of Helike grinned, and the red in his eye was an endless sea of blood. "Nature tells, my friend. Nature always tells."

The boy's grinned widened, long and sharp and pearly white.

"I wonder what *your* nature is, Hierarch."

It was a title and a curse, the ruling seat of the League that had only once been filled since the founding.

It was all these things, but most of all it was a Name.

## **Villainous Interlude: Calamity I**

*"That's the thing with invincibility. You have it until you don't."*

— Dread Empress Prudence the First, the 'Frequently Vanquished'

Nicae had been built thrice, with three different intents. The original settlement had spawned from the federation of a handful of fishing villages banding together to facilitate trade with the Baalite colonists settling the shores of Ashur after having absorbed or exterminated the tribes that lived there. The shape of them could still be seen, the three largest of those villages having over the centuries grown into the three ports of the city. The second time had come after Stygia took half the infant Free Cities by military force, back in the ancient days where they were the only Calernians to have a standing army. Nicae was occupied for decades, until the Stygian army attempted to force their general onto the throne of Stygia and the chain of events that would lead to all freeborn Stygians being forbidden to take arms began and heralded the collapse of the fledgling Stygian empire. The office of Basileus was proclaimed as absolute ruler, tall walls built to shield the people from marauders and a war fleet built. What was left of that intent was now known as the Old City, the beating heart of power in the maritime city, raised in old stone and winding streets.

The third and last time Nicea was built anew was after the Second Samite War, when repeated defeats at the hands of the Ashuran fleets proved the ruling Basilea's incompetence in matters of war beyond question. So the office of Strategos was born, the admiral who'd managed to bring them back from the brink give control over

all military affairs and promptly overstepping his given powers by raising a second set of walls to circle the slums that had grown past the old ones and ordering the construction of the Greenstone Rampart. A set of greenstone towers jutting out from the sea and protecting the three ports, warded intensively and bristling with dwarven engines. There had been foresight in this, in Black's opinion. Though Nicae had never won their wars over rule of the Samite Gulf in the centuries that followed, the Greenstone Rampart ensured the city itself never fell from the sea. Ashur had to settle for terms instead of subjugation, and Nicean sails continued to be seen in every ports – if never quite as free to trade as they would have liked.

The city had been built to resist armies not led by villains, unlike the hardened castles of Callow, and it showed. If Summerholm had been assaulted by a handful of floating towers as Nicae was, the Royal Guards would have been focusing trebuchet fire from the positions behind the walls to bring them down before the outer rampart could be overrun. All that the Niceans managed was sporadic ballista fire that did little more than chip at the foundations. The massive ramps being tugged forward by enslaved citizens of Atalante and Delos lumbered forward, archers killing the slaves by the score by barely slowing the advance. A mistake, this. They would run out of arrows long before the Tyrant ran out of expendables. How it would unfold from there was as good as writ, if the heroes did not get involved. The Stygian phalanxes would climb the ramps and scatter the mercenaries and militia that held the rampart, forcing the Niceans back behind the taller walls of the Old City as the Helikean army passed through the gates untouched. From there, it would be butchery. The armies of Helike were better fit for field battles than siege, but their infantry was hardened and well-armed.

The famous Helikean horse would not be able to bring their full strength to bear inside cramped streets, would not be able to use their devastating combination of horse archery and spears, but they would run down scattered mercenaries like animals. This was the writ of the battle, as it stood. The only question was of where the heroes would intervene to attempt to turn the tides. The outer walls seemed the most likely stage, for whether it held or broke would decide the battle. Yet the towers were hero-bait in its finest incarnation. Amadeus was not unaware of the tactical advantages that having a force in the sky gave, against a mundane army, but there was a reason he'd stamped down on any notion of the Legions of Terror fielding them. There were practical concerns, like the logistics of feeding a host that was leagues above the ground and the requirements to raising such a fortress in the first place, but most of all it was that flying fortresses tended to *crash*. It was like hanging a sword with rope above the heads of the men in that fortress and sending a formal invitation to any present hero to cut it. Whatever fleeting advantage was gained by the fielding of the fortress was

inevitably overshadowed by the massive costs incurred when it was brought down.

"Slid past their wards," Wekesa whispered in his ear over the enchanted piece of silver he'd inserted under the skin. "Someone tried to improve them recently, but their caster has more breadth than depths. Scrying patterns in place."

"Locations," Black said.

"Hedge Wizard is headed for the towers," Warlock replied after a moment. "Valiant Champion with the Proceran fantassins on the wall. Can't find the White Knight or the Bard, though the scrying grows unstable over on three, twelve to fifteen diameter. I'd say our boy Hanno got his hands on an amulet to scramble us."

Tricks rarely worked twice on heroes. It would have been overly optimistic to believe that the enemy would not seek to neuter the tactics they'd displayed last time, even if this was only a mildly effective parry. As the communication spell that connected Wekesa to Amadeus and Sabah was derivative of scrying, it was likely it would be made ineffective when the Duni engaged the White Knight. Only inexact sorcery prior to the distance being closed could feasibly be deployed.

"No sign of the Ashen Priestess?" Amadeus asked.

"Not a one," Wekesa confirmed. "She might actually be dead, Amadeus."

"I imagine she will be," the Black Knight replied. "Until it is decisive for the heroes that she is not. Too many third aspects remain unknowns for us to assume we've seen the last of her."

"Once in a while," Warlock said amusedly, "we do take Creation by surprise. We might have gotten lucky, for all you know, hit some weakness we were unaware of."

"We do not belong to the side that gets lucky, my friend," Amadeus murmured.

The villain closed his eyes, weighing his options.

"Sabah, keep an eye on the walls," he said. "Do not back the Tyrant against the Champion unless it is a certainty the city will hold."

"And if he's about to die?" the Taghreb replied through the spell.

"Let him," Black said. "Our only concerns are that Nicae falls and the White Knight dies. He is essential to neither."

"I hear you," she said.

The instructions were enough that she would be able to tap into Obey, if it proved necessary.

"Wekesa," he said.

"The Hedge Wizard again, I'm guessing," he mused.

"Yes," Amadeus confirmed. "And more. Red Skies protocol."

There was a lengthy moment of silence.

"We haven't gone that far since the Conquest," Wekesa said, and his voice was pleased. "You're certain? No collateral damage concerns?"

"Reputational damage is irrelevant if the Tyrant becomes the Hierarch of the Free Cities," the green-eyed man murmured. "All targets of opportunity are fair game. Use what you will, save for what falls under the Dark Day protocol."

"Ah, you sweet thing," Warlock drawled. "I *have* been meaning to try out a few spells."

Power bloomed in the distance. The stars above them began to grow crimson, staining the night, and the Black Knight moved. He had a hero to kill.

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He'd crafted another decoy, for he had no reason not to. As expected, the Hedge Wizard ignored it. She flew directly for the towers, her great wings flapping on one of the three dozen open scrying links he'd crafted. It had taken decades to refine this particular method of farsight, creating runic arrays that would grant him eyes wherever he needed them without actively needing his attention and steering. It was also one of the reasons Wekesa rarely took the field in person: the arrays were exceedingly easy to disrupt, if found. Using distractions to keep the enemy guessing at his true locations while he worked his Gift from behind wards was the most effective use of his abilities. Warlock did occasionally miss the vindictive pleasure of incinerating the opposition in person, but he was no longer a young man. Incautious villains did not get to live as long as he had.

"It will be good night," he smiled, watching the battle unfold.

How long had it been, since Amadeus had granted him this much leeway on the field? Too long. Oh, his old friend still forbade the use of any sorcery that would grow unchecked if not stopped and any permanent rifts in Creation, but Wekesa was not eager to use the spells that would fall under the Dark Day protocol. Magical plagues had a nasty habit of growing beyond anyone's control, and only a fool would expect to keep a leash on a

permanent portal linking to another dimension. The Dead King had managed it, some Soninke argued, but even millennia past that man's apotheosis mages still sifted through the remains of his reign to advance their craft. Warlock was disinclined to renounce his humanity for another form of immortality when villainy alone could yield the same results, properly used. It was a poor man's escape of the Final Shackles, anyway. For all his power, the Dead King remained undead. His nature had grown eminently less changeable, his ability to learn crippled, while humanity... Humanity was such a miraculous fluctuating thing. Tikoloshe would not have remained so eternally fascinated by it otherwise.

Behind his wards, watching it all, Wekesa stroked his beard and found three opportunities. The first was the outer walls. Sabah had yet to get involved there, and so he need not be worried about her being caught in the crossfire. Dead under the walls, killed in hatred. And now the Stygian phalanx was marching up the ramps, more blood would flow. Power was largely irrelevant to what he was setting out to accomplish, for the kind of force that could be gathered by mass sacrifices and theft of godhead was a blunt instrument. It would be used then spent, leaving the practitioner that called on it spent as well. No, what he sought was *affinity*. Finding similarities on both sides of the boundary before thinning it enough the realities grew muddled and overlapping. It was not a flawless method, of course. There were an infinity of Hells and more adjacent dimensions than even he could discover, but he could only use those he knew of. Knowledge, as in all things, was the great limitation.

Wekesa knew many things, though, secrets old and new ripped from ancient tomes and the minds of lesser gods alike.

**"Imbricate,"** he murmured.

Two-hundredth and seventy-third Hell. The realm of slaughter unending and meaningless. On the weaker side of the scale, weak in devils and imprisoned souls both, but it was so very close. The Tyrant was responsible for it, stripping this battle of much meaning save his own whims. The blood across the field and walls shivered, then boiled. Guiding the alignment took all his concentration, balancing the power he was willing to invest through the runic arrays to the depth of imbrication that was useful. Creation and Hell snapped into place, and his lips quirked. Men rose around the ramps and on the wall, missing limbs and bleeding and every one of them dead. The corpses took up their weapons, broken or whole, and those that could not struck with bare hands instead. Driven by endless hatred the dead turned on everything in sight, including each other. Screams and chaos spread across the battlefield, but Wekesa paid no attention. The imbrication would fade away within the hour, and needed no more supervision from his will. Now, where was the little Wizard?

Inside one of the towers, if the trail of her Name could be trusted. Which it could not, given there were tricks to fake this and given the nature of her Role she was all but mandated to have them. An interesting thing, this Name. The Hedge Wizard relied on providence more than the average hero, in his eyes. By Heavenly mandate she would always have the exact trick needed to escape the trouble she was in, more irritatingly hard to kill a pest than any save a bardic Named. Abandoning subtlety was occasionally needed to deal with the likes of her. The Tyrant had lost his finest mages, and so his floating towers were even more unstable than ones the heroes had wrecked at Delos. No doubt the boy expected to detonate them at some point in the battle, and Wekesa would grant him his wish this once. Delving past the outer wards was a thing of ease, given that there were Helikean standard and so a century of learning behind anything come of the Wasteland, or even Callow for that matter. Callowan Gifted were largely amateurs borne of a particularly shoddy apprenticeship system, but centuries of being assaulted by Praesi mages had forced them to develop very effective, if simplistic, warding schemes.

Actually attacking the core was unnecessary. The conversion array that kept the tower afloat was so flimsy any proper disruption would lead to cascading failures. Wekesa's own offensive, meant to manifest limited kinetic force within the range of a mile at a regrettably high conversion rate, shone and one single rune in the tower's array was damaged. Thirty heartbeats later the tower exploded, heated rocks carving a swath of destruction in the outer city. Civilian casualties, he noted, would not be light. Ah, well. It wasn't like Amadeus was trying to annex this one. The scrying spell he had pointed at the location blanked until he adjusted the parameters, reforming to deal with the arcane energies still filling the air. The Hedge Wizard *had* been inside, he saw. Yet remained largely unharmed by the explosion. Half-phasing into Arcadia, by the likes of it. Clever, but given the unstable nature of the tower's array the energy would have scattered across the spectrum. She would have been affected. The Hedge Wizard, running across floating tiles, began to head for his decoy. Warlock smiled fondly. Trying to trace his location through it, was she?

"Ah, youth," he said.

He'd cleaned off the rust. It was time, he supposed, to get serious.

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The young woman was bleeding, bent in a corner and moaning in pain. The White Knight slowed as he came by her and came close. Amadeus raised an eyebrow, but Hanno was not so foolish as that. The sword cleared the scabbard in an instant, cutting through the



animated corpse's neck. A twist of will had the other three corpses he'd scattered across the rooftops pull the triggers of the crossbows just as the hero's sword began to touch flesh. It was not enough. The sword flashed out and parried the two bolts that would have taken him in the back, letting the third pass him by for it would not have touched him. *Mistake*. The third bolt hit the goblinfire ball he'd put inside the woman and green flames erupted instantly. The Light formed a blinding halo around the White Knight before the fire could touch him, the Heavenly power soon devoured but allowing him to retreat without it touching his flesh. There was only so much of the Light the man could call on without hollowing himself out, but Black knew better than to turn a death match with a hero into a matter of endurance. That way lay the wiping of a bloody lip, a trite quote from the Book of All Things and an improbably second wind when he himself was at the end of his rope.

The three corpses leapt down the rooftops and ran towards the White Knight, open and clearly visible wounds across their bellies. The kind a villain might put a ball of goblinfire in, if he so wished. Amadeus had not, of course. It would have been a waste of substance he had a limited stock of as well as the introduction of an uncontrollable factor to a battlefield where precision would be key. But Hanno could not afford the chance, and so he backed away to give himself room. *Mistake*. Amadeus' shadow snaked across the gloom behind him, puncturing the loose pavestones and detonating the demolition charge under his feet. The explosion would have earned broken bones from less powerful a Named, but for a White Knight the only advantage won was toppling him. Another twist of will and three crossbow bolts whistled at his prone form. He rolled over at the last moment, evading all but one, yet that last bolt struck his arm. Not his sword-arm, unfortunately, but he would have to deal with the wound regardless. The three corpses retreated out of sight. Hanno ripped the bolt out of his arms and cauterized the wound with Light, predictably.

"Is this all you amount to, Black Knight?" he called out. "Smoke and mirrors, ambushes and a handful of tricks."

As if engaging a hero on their own terms was anything but sheer stupidity. The provocation was not a very skilful one, a betrayal of the man's youth for all the danger he represented. Amadeus gave him what he wanted. From the ruins of a home across the street, a corpse in armour identical to his plate strode out. Unsheathing a plain steel sword, the undead offered Hanno a mocking blade salute. The hero charged, but he had learned. He flared the Light before coming close to the puppet, shrugging off the crossbow fire from the other dead. *Mistake*. There was no need for him to arrange detonation when the hero's blade was wreathed in Light. The sword went clean through the plate and the goblinfire blew, spreading across the edge. The White Knight

hastily dropped it, and there went the shapeshifting weapon that was of clear Gigantes make. The hero's lips turned to a snarl and he made a blade of Light. A liability to exploited. Killing heroes, in Amadeus' eyes, was much like peeling an onion.

Layer by layer it went, until all that remained was the weeping.

—

Gods, she'd forgotten how nightmarish it got when Warlock went off the deep end. The sky had gone red and the dead were rising. Typical. That strange Levantine girl was having the time of her life with it, though, and so was the Tyrant. He'd begun screeching about treachery from his hovering throne, pleased as a cat that got the cream. The boys were underestimating this one, she thought. Amadeus thought he was straight out of the old Imperial mould and so doomed to shoot himself in the foot at his moment of triumph, but he did not smell of that kind of crazy to her. Whatever schemes he had going, and Sabah did not care to parse out the insane maze that would be, she doubted they would involve rising too high. He was the kind of irritating prick that made a virtue of defeat and pissing everybody off, just like the Heir had been. And Wekesa, well, he did tend to think that everybody that wasn't a mage was a little slow. Considering he'd been set to starve or freeze to death in the Wasteland while on the run as Apprentice, back when he'd met Amadeus, she was a little amused at how he kept turning up his nose at practical skills. Like starting a fire without getting a devil involved.

The Champion kept the wall afloat when the mercenaries began to run by using an aspect, though Sabah was too far to hear what it was. Whatever it'd been, though, it had turned Proceran rabbits to lions. They were carving their way straight into the Stygian phalanx, not that the Tyrant seemed to care. When it came to the two of them, the Taghreb judged it an even match. The heroine never managed to land a proper hit, but the beams of light the villain used hardly scuffed her plate. Sabah sympathized, having taken a swing at the muscled girl herself in the past. Anything but the war hammer the Levantine with the badger helm walked off: it was like hitting a wall. A different story when the Beast came out, but there weren't a lot of things in Creation that could ignore Sabah when she let that loose. Captain sniffed the air, and grimaced at what she got from it. Brimstone, and the red in the sky was getting deeper. Sooner or later something nasty was going to start raining down. Better if she could finish off her heroine before it got to that.

She seemed like a good kid, the Champion. Heart in the right place, spoiling for a fight the way the young ones often were. Heroes still cutting their teeth tended to think they were invincible, before running into their first proper villain. Those that survived that emerged stronger from the experience, and

there lay the problem. Sabah didn't particularly care if someone worshipped the Heavens instead of the Gods Below. Her people's deities were most loved when they were looking somewhere else. *Imagine the kind of pricks they'd be if we weren't on their side,* Sabah, her mother had been fond of saying. The issue was that when heroes got a little killing under their belt they tended to go looking for a bigger fight, and right now Praes was the biggest fight to be had on the continent. Except for the Kingdom of the Dead, but who'd be dumb enough to try that? Hye didn't count, she had an odd knack for killing things she shouldn't in the place where she should have godsdamned common sense. Still, it was a shame. The Champion truly did seem like a good kid.

Sabah had killed a lot of good kids, over the years.

Didn't particularly enjoy it, but if the choice was between the people she loved and some young fools who thought they could fix the world with a spell or a sword, well, that wasn't a choice at all. World didn't really want to be fixed. Wasn't supposed to be. But the broken chariot kept on rolling down the road, so why fuck with what worked? Amadeus had tried it for forty years and he'd had good days for a toil, but a lot more bad ones. Wekesa had understood quicker, washed his hands of the whole thing and instead taken care of his son and his experiments. But Sabah wasn't willing to let Amadeus into the deep end with only Eudokia to prop him up, so Captain she had been. Was and would be. Sometimes that meant doing things she didn't like, but she doubted anyone in the world enjoyed their work everyday. She got her hands bloody, but it could have been worse. The truly dark things Amadeus always did himself. He'd never been one to let others do his dirty work for him, if he could avoid it. Sabah watched the fight on the ramparts turn, biding her time, and she was not made to linger.

The Tyrant summoned a stream of what looked like spectres – he'd regret letting something like those loose with Wekesa on the battlefield, she mused – and while the Champion held the mercenaries around her died until she was forced to retreat. Best keep an eye on that, Captain mused. Wouldn't do to let the girl meddle in Amadeus' fight with her leader.

Sabah followed the heroine into the streets, eerily quiet for a woman her size.

## **Villainous Interlude: Calamity II**

*"Who should really be afraid, between the dragon and the peasant with a sword?"*

– Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

The Hedge Wizard was attempting an offensive. Wekesa was more irritated than worried, but these things had a way of growing out

of control if allowed to go unchecked. The girl had used an aspect relating to conversion to survive the trap laying behind his decoy, an expected outcome though the specifics of her counter had come as something of a surprise. It had been a mistake on his part to strengthen the detonation in hopes of an early crippling: she'd made the power her own and promptly shoved it through an exotic spell formula. Proceran-derived, by the looks of it. Interesting, that. Practitioners of the Principate had been heavily influenced by the Gigantes traditions that still lived strong in the Titanomachy, though they still subscribed to the much-maligned Pelagian theory of magic. When it came to broader sorcery they were far behind Praes, but there were few their match when it came to enchantments. The sleeping spell Wekesa had used to keep the Hunter under control last year, for example, had been a modified take on an old Proceran enchantment. Removing the requirement of true love's kiss had been a stark improvement, even if it weakened the overall strength.

That the roots of the Wizard's formula were in enchanting had been obvious. The only way she could have successfully used an amount of power that large and unstable was by forcing a strict condition on it. Two thirds of it had gone to waste regardless, but the remainder had covered seven miles in search of the assigned criterion. She'd found five instances, because Wekesa wasn't a fool and he'd laid false trails. Running after the relays of false positives would keep her occupied for the moment, until a proper response could be mustered. This was, in the end, the limitation of the branch of sorcery the Soninke had chosen to master. It lacked the *immediacy* of more direct magic. Wards and boundaries required outside factors to be accelerated in forming or a great deal of preparation. The raging dead on the walls had returned to the grave, by now, and it would be a quarter bell yet before the Red Skies were ready for actual use. Watching the scrying screens in front of him, Warlock tracked the silhouette galloping across the plains towards his second relay.

She'd chose the shape of a horse, this time. Shapeshifting had always an interesting branch of magic, in his eyes, but ultimately a dead end. It was fixed to the limits allowed by creational laws and even High Arcana could at most allow slight deviation from this. No shapeshifter could take the shape of a dragon, for one, or even most creatures with sorcerous nature. The physical and metaphysical composition was too different, and something could not be made of nothing – particularly if that something had markers fundamentally different from anything else in Creation. Warlock put the thought aside. He would return to those experiments soon enough, after this little dust-off was settled. His son had sent him promising results before Wekesa had to leave for the Free Cities showing that tapirs, unlike pigs, would gain wings but not the ability to breathe fire if infused with enough sorcery. That meant there was a qualitative difference between what lay at the heart of a dragon and – ah,

yes, distraction. Warlock tapped into one of his inert arrays with a thought, arranging the runes through the medium of High Arcana.

He'd have to use his own will for this, which was unfortunate. Wekesa was aware that few aside from the oldest Soninke bloodlines and the purest of the Taghreb had as much power to call on, but it was still a limiting factor. No mage had endless power, and burning out when calling on the kind of sorcery he did would have... dire consequences. A circle of runes formed in the air above the shapeshifted wizard and locked with a hum. A hundred times the gravity should be enough to turn her to a smears, he estimated. The array triggered without missing a beat, but the Hedge Wizard's form shimmered. Instead of being plastered all over the grass she reappeared three feet to the left of his spell, human again. Warlock raised an eyebrow. That had looked like teleportation, but it was mathematically impossible. Adjusting the nature of the scrying array, he dismissed the gravity circle and studied the sorcerous trail. Ah, displacement. She'd let the power push her through the half-existing space between dimensions. There must have bled, or she would have reappeared directly outside his spell instead of drifting to the side.

Drumming his fingers thoughtfully, Wekesa tapped into another inert array. A different approach, then. Direct applications had proved ineffective but perhaps indirect would see better results. A bag of tricks as eclectic as hers would not come without drawbacks, which made it an obvious avenue of approach. Forging four runes of containment on cardinal points, Warlock crafted an inwards zone of disruption: within the boundaries, all power would be randomly amplified and diminished. His lips half-quirked when he saw the tiles she used to walk across the sky rip straight through her sleeves in their uncontrolled expansion, exploding in a shower of shards when they forcefully surpassed their capacity. The Hedge Wizard used the blood from the cuts in her hands to trace a line across her face, and to his displeasure this sealed all power on her. She ran out of the boundaries dictated by the zone, unharmed save for a few cuts. Warlock dismissed the spells, glancing at the seven inert arrays that remained around him. He could, of his own capacity, use perhaps another four workings of this calibre without being at risk of burning out.

The girl was proving to be troublesome. The Wizard of the West had wielded ten times her raw power, but he'd been... brittle. Breakable, when outplayed. This one was weaker but fluid, and Wekesa wondered if that was what she'd always been meant to be. The White Knight had been gifted an aspect that made him extremely versatile, a way to compensate for Amadeus' massive advantage in experience in skill. The Champion was apt to weather great violence and had previously been paired with a powerful

healer that dabbled in offensive miracles. The fighting elements of this heroic band, by the look of it, had been crafted specifically to kill the remaining Calamities. It wouldn't be the first time the Heavens attempted such a trick, but it was the first instance in decades where the band managed to come together before core members were eliminated. A greater degree of caution on his part was advisable.

Warlock began to insert his will into an array, but ceased when he felt his relays being tapped into. The girl had found one of them, and instead of following to the next in the line was... mapping out the inner workings? He saw her lips move on his scrying screen, reading the word. *Learn*. Wekesa's face creased in wariness. It was one thing for a transitional Name like Squire or Apprentice to have that aspect, quite another to see it in a full-fledged Name. Ranger was living proof of how dangerous it could be, given enough time to accumulate weight. The Hedge Wizard smiled in triumph, then created another relay to add to his own system. Using that, she immediately followed the current down to his current location. Her face appeared on the scrying screen ahead of him, looking back.

"Found you," the heroine said, eyes hard.

She'd used her second aspect, Warlock mused. He could return the courtesy.

"**Link**," he replied.

Laws were nothing more than boundaries, and it had been his life's work to learn the manipulation of those – even the law of sympathy. This was his most abstract aspect, but perhaps the most dangerous. It allowed him to create sympathetic links between entities that, by right, should have none. In this case, one of the remaining floating towers and the relays the Hedge Wizard had just taken over. Idly tapping a rune, Warlock used his access to trigger the collapse of the tower and the power raged through the connection. The impact was brutal. Her right shoulder, the entire arm and part of her rib cage simply... evaporated. The heroine threw up blood and Warlock began crafting an array to finish her off, but she managed to whisper one word.

"**Repurpose**," she said.

The same conversion aspect as before, he deduced. The leftover wisps of the tower's power – and ah, it had collapsed on the city as well, though not exploded – came together like blue smoke and reformed the mass she had just lost. The result was more magic than flesh, he noted, but it would allow her operate well enough. Not a single-use aspect, then. Neither was Imbricate, which made them an even match in this regard. Wekesa leaned forward, breaking the scrying connection and ignoring the battle. She had earned his full attention.

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Ride would have been a lethally dangerous aspect, in the hands of another hero. It leant a sharp increase in speed, armament that ignored enemy armour and protection that nothing short of concentrated spellfire would be able to dent. It was wasted on the White Knight. The man had spent too long learning the skills of others and neglected his own abilities, turning an aspect that should have been a near-unavoidable killing stroke into a weak gambit unlikely to ever draw blood on another Named. Shadows hooked through the window and dug into the walls, dragging him through the space and tossing him straight through the door in the back of the house. Brushing off wooden shards, he landed one street across and through the opening watched the White Knight pulverize the entire wall in a blinding flash of light, the aspect dimming after it had struck a target. Hanno landed in a crouch as Black sent out his shadow tendrils, green eyes seeking structural weak points. Two sharpeners detonated a heartbeat later and the roof collapsed on the hero's head as the villain made for the rooftops. Better to change his angle of attack before reengaging.

He'd already baited out one aspect without using any of his own, though admittedly two of his three were less... direct than those of his predecessors. Lead strengthened whoever he led on the field, but had no real use in a duel such as this, and while Conquer was currently sharpening his physical strength and reflexes it would do little else in this kind of situation. The aspect was better fit for war than skirmished between Named, a reflection of his departure from the traditional role of the Black Knights of old. As for Destroy, it was best employed as a tool for denial of enemy abilities. Anything it could accomplish on a purely physical level could be accomplished by more mundane means he had available, and should he ever attempt to use it in direct opposition to a hero's aspect the difference in power would see him promptly crushed. Or worse, corner his opponent badly enough they would have to learn new abilities on the spot that he had no solid measure against. It was a balancing act, this, where he must carefully lead the enemy in a position where they could be killed without ever overpowering them by too much.

The most effective moment for the kill was usually when the hero had pulled out their trump card, or just after they had, and even then there were risks. Should he ever fail to manage a killing stroke then, the situation could be reversed in a heartbeat.

Now, with Ride taken out of the equation the second stage of this fight should be approaching. The moment the White Knight was put in a dire situation he would tap into the aspect that leant him the different skillsets he'd used to recover from his incoming defeat in their last duel, but this was not a state of affairs that should be approached lightly. For one, Hanno would become

exceedingly difficult to contain the moment he began using these other skills. The loss of his enchanted weapon should hinder him, the very reason Amadeus had arranged its destruction, but it would have been foolish to assume the man could not produce similar results using the Light. It was, after all, the very stuff of the Heavens shaped by will. Maintaining it had to be tiring, however, and this had been a side-benefit to be achieved by getting rid of the artefact. Amadeus knew better than to attempt to win through heroic exhaustion, but slowing down the enemy was very much possible. And if the White Knight attempted to compensate for that by using his Name, well, he would be effectively hollowing out his own power and heading directly for a collapse down the line. That would be another opportunity for a kill, in Black's experience, if he was quick enough.

The dark-skinned hero emerged from the rubble without wounds, dark eyes searching for the opposition. Amadeus exerted his will and one of his two remaining corpses moved behind the shutters of an empty house, drawing enemy attention. He struck in just that moment, staggering four blades at calculated intervals. The first held by a tendril was parried when the White Knight immediately turned to face him, the second would have struck at the weak point of the greaves but was avoided by a shift of footing and the sword he swung himself was caught in hand. *Mistake*. His shield struck the hero in the chest, taking advantage of the weakened stance to throw him off his feet, and the fourth blade plunged down from above and went straight through the plate. Goblin steel scraped against the collarbone instead of carving it. He'd been imprecise, and so lost an opportunity for a deeper wound. Unfortunate. Amadeus gave ground immediately and the shadow-held blades retreated with him, just in time to avoid the burst of Light the hero detonated in his wound to seal it.

A costly way of healing, this. The touch of the Heavens on mortal flesh was never light, or without consequence. Amadeus could see the function it was meant for, though. If the White Knight was truly meant to face Catherine after she'd succeeded him, then he gave the man six in ten odds of winning a duel against her. His apprentice still had the nasty habit of overcommitting at close range once she'd drawn blood, and a semi-offensive form of healing like this would be damaging to her. Combined with her lack of experience with different kinds of Named, the White Knight's aspects would gain him a decisive advantage in a clash. As usual, the Heavens stacked the fight before the fight ever happened. Best he never let it come to that, for everyone's sake. Catherine was too important to die at the hands of some hunting dog of the Seraphim.

"Thousands will die tonight, because you keep me from checking the Tyrant," the White Knight said, circling around him.



Heroes did have a fascination with talking, didn't they? Black reached for the bundle of power he'd left in the second corpse that remained, watching through its eyes. Sixty to eighty heartbeats before it arrived, depending on the struggling. Running out the hourglass by talking was acceptable.

"I have no personal enmity with anyone here," Amadeus said calmly. "And this war is not of my making."

"Yet you participate in it," the White Knight pressed. "You have responsibility for this. Guilt."

"I've been afflicted by many things, in my old age," Black said. "Guilt is not one of them."

"And you believe this makes you better?" Hanno said.

"Oh, I am very much a monster," Amadeus conceded, reluctantly amused. "But then so are the things you serve and yourself as well. A mere different shade of barbarity hardly puts you in a position to lecture, White."

The hero would have replied, but Black's undead cleared the corner and the man went still. The corpse held a struggling woman in its arms, knife at her throat.

"Surrender or she dies," Amadeus said.

The man went directly for him, without hesitation. The Choir of Judgement did not suffer lack of decisiveness in its servants. A twist of will saw the woman released and she fled straight to hero and now *that* had him hesitate. A different matter, a hostage and an innocent in need of protection. The White Knight was not the first hero sworn to Judgement he had fought. Their kind was taught to think of people in particular categories, and during that heartbeat the hero had to readjust his assessment of her. In that very moment Black struck, blades in motion. One tendril was sent directly towards the woman's back, slowly enough Hanno could parry it if he moved there.

"**Recall,**" the hero said.

He blurred in motion, shaft of light lashing straight through the shadow holding the sword as he protected the civilian. *Spear-wielding skillset, possibly a lancer. High mobility, expect piercing strikes.* No wound, but Amadeus' base objective had been achieved regardless. Now the more difficult work could begin. In silence, the green-eye man advanced.

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It was getting warm out, and not just because Sabah was swinging half a hundred pounds of solid steel at the kid. Warlock's ritual

with the sky was getting stronger, getting closer to what he'd pulled at the Fields of Streges. It was only a matter of time until the rain of fire began, and anybody's guess if he would limit it to just that. Captain wasn't eager to start dancing around tower-sized burning rocks falling from above, but she was no stranger to it either. The Valiant Champion was way ahead the curve even for a hero her age and she'd learned from their fight at Delos, but she wasn't used to fighting an opponent like Sabah and it was costing her. That shift in her footing, right there? It was meant to deal with something Captain's size, yes, but something on four legs. A monster, not a person. The hammer ploughed into her shield and tossed her into the wall, though the thing didn't break. She'd learned the trick for putting Name power into weapons since they'd last fought, though she used it to strengthen the steel instead of add sharpness to a blade the way most Named did.

Given another few years, this one would have been a right terror. She hit like godsdamned trebuchet and her defence got stronger with every scrap. Sabah had fought quite a few heroes meant to stand and deliver, over the years, but this one was head and shoulder above the rest of the crowd. She could take punishment like a Holy Shield and still swing like a Blood Sword. At least she didn't go berserk like the latter. Even with the Beast out Sabah had found him hard to put down when he started spasming and his body unhinged. Those people from around Hedges were weird fucks, even for Callowans. Still, tonight was tonight and not in a few years. The kid was still out of her league for now, and down an aspect as well. Sabah hadn't had to use one of hers yet, though since this was their second scrap she'd probably have to at some point. The more you fought heroes the more of a pain they became, as a rule. Putting some length to her stride, Captain moved to strike while the iron was hot.

The first hit the Champion ducked under and it put a hole in the wall, but the second nailed her to the floor through the shoulder. Didn't break bone, though. Fucking Name strengthening. Sabah kicked her in the stomach but she brought up her shield in time and it just blew her back a few feet.

"Good fight," the Champion praised, grinning through her badger helm. "Getting blood flow."

"You've got the most potential to grow out of your band," Captain replied honestly. "I'm glad we're fighting now and not after you went adventuring a few years."

"Life is adventure," the girl philosophized in broken tradertalk. "Kill many things back home. Much slaughter of other claimants."

Well, they did say the Named of the Dominion were closest to the old breed of heroes. The ones who'd gone traipsing like well-armed vagrants around Calernia, killing dragons and looting every

tomb in sight. Before the House of Light had gone and civilized them, like that entire religion wasn't about licking the feet of the angels telling you what to do. Sabah had never understood why anyone would pay a tithe to be given sermons, but people out of the Wasteland did tend to get strange ideas in their heads. Captain usually left the statecraft to Malicia and Amadeus, but she did know that when it came to commerce middlemen always screwed the buyers. Why most of Calernia wouldn't think to apply something that simple to the Gods they kept to, she had no notion.

"I don't suppose you could just go back to Levant?" Sabah asked. "Leave the Empire alone. I'm fairly sure Black would not pursue if you just stuck to your borders."

"Eh," the Champion refused. "Much boring. No good fight there. Procer all peace-talking, now. You legend, Biggest Girl! Many songs for slaying of you, and drinks without pay."

Not talk about the power of friendship or justice to be served, which she had to admit was rather refreshing. There were only so many times you could get those speeches before they kind of... melded together. About half of them quoted the Book of All Things, too, and Sabah hadn't read that so she never got the references. She sighed.

"I apologize, then," she said. "Because I don't think this ends well for you."

"You much kicking of my arse," the heroine ruefully admitted. "But I Valiant Champion, not no-balls Arlesite. I stand, and **Exalt.**"

Second aspect of the night. They were doing brisk business. Sabah watched the ripple go through Creation and frowned. Domain, huh. Champion types did tend to have those. Amadeus had been caught in the Unconquered Champion's pocket dimension a few years back and Sabah had... not taken it well. Wekesa hadn't been able to locate him at first, so they'd had to face the possibility he was dead. She'd lost control of the Beast when she'd been told the news, and woken up to a butcher's yard of half-eaten corpses. She still had dreams about that, sometimes. She'd not been that out of control since she'd been a young girl. If Warlock hadn't started carving into the soul of the hero's childhood friend to find a hint about what the nature of the dimension was, the others might have thought him dead too and that would have gotten... bad. If Ranger had come down from Refuge to avenge him, she didn't think Vale would have survived it – or anyone trying to get her to stop, for that matter.

The girl's domain was just an arena, Sabah saw. Old sunny stone with empty stands stretched in a long oval, but maybe not so empty as they seemed at first. If she sharpened her ears she

could almost hear cheering and applause. The two of them were standing in sand, and the Valiant Champion raised her axe. Her movements were more fluid than before. She was probably stronger inside here, a sharp increase of everything as long as the domain held. Fit with the word, anyway. *That poor kid.* She'd picked her grounds, yes, but she'd also taken Captain somewhere she didn't have to worry about the consequences of going all out. It was one thing to lean into the Beast when there was a risk she'd end up eating a portion of Nicae. Another when it was just the two of them. Sabah rolled her shoulder, and dropped the hammer.

"Unleash," she said, and the world went red.

## Villainous Interlude: Calamity III

*"The truth of monsters is that, in the end, they die. If they didn't we would have to call them gods."*

– Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

The Beast moved, but Sabah was within it. It was not control, for control was an illusion, but it was enough. She could yet think, even with blood and heat pumping in her veins. The Valiant Champion screamed a war cry and swung her axe, but what did the Beast care for this? The enemy steel dug into her flesh, blood and fur spraying, but with a roar she bit down on the hero. The shield gave under her fangs, even with the strength of a Name behind it, and she crunched into the plate before throwing the Champion to the side. The Beast had wanted to swallow the girl whole, but Sabah knew this would have been a mistake. Covered in blood and spit, the heroine rose to her feet. She began to speak but the Beast huffed out a laugh and struck again. The wound the axe had carved was already healed, the intertwined madness and power within her growing with every moment. The heroine raised the broken remnant of her shield but a shoulder bump was enough to send her crashing into the walls of the arena

Stone broke, bone broke and the scream whetted the Beast's appetite.

The Champion was better at fighting beasts than men, but Sabah was not like anything the girl had ever thought before. Of all the Calamities, only she had embraced the old truth: if you were strong enough, even Fate broke under your teeth. Fountains of sand exploded behind her as she charged and the heroine hastily leapt onto the stands. The cheering sounded, oh, and the clapping as well. The Beast roared and it drowned out all the worlds. Claws scrabbling against the stone rails, Sabah gave when the enemy tried to use to high grounds to strike at her head. Tail twisting behind her, the Beast paced the sands of the arena and waited for the Champion to come down. The girl was catching her breath, though. Wasn't moving. The Beast crouched, then leapt onto the stands. Benches and flickering silhouettes shattered as

she rolled onto the stone, rising back to her feet. The sun came down harshly, blinding her, but Sabah sniffed the air and felt the wounded enemy coming closer. Petty arena tricks.

Clawed paw rising, the Beast struck down into the stands. The arena shook. Again and again she did, until the entire wing collapsed beneath her in a shower of stone and dust and sand. The glare of the sun was gone, now, and she saw the Champion hopping from ruin to ruin. Shaking herself clear of the dust, Sabah forced her will onto the Beast. Claws closed around stones as she rose onto her back legs, tossing chunks of rocks the size of houses at the heroine. She dodged the first, swatted aside the second but was buried under the third. The Beast licked its chops in satisfaction and leapt onto the stone, shattering it and the stands beneath it. There was a tunnel underneath and the Champion flopped down onto the ground.

**"Rally,"** the heroine gasped.

She shone like the sun and all the flickering silhouettes flocked to her, filling her until her strength swelled. Her armour was smoking, her axe shaking with barely held power. Sabah recognized the aspect from earlier but the Beast cared little for the detail. Her paw whipped out from the outside, tearing through the outer wall of the tunnel and sending the Champion flying again. She landed on her feet at the very top of the stands, where the domain ended, and charged back down. The Beast sniffed the air. Blood, blood and ruin. The heroine's strength waned and her little world with it. Sabah leapt down onto the sands and let her tail sweep a trail behind her, turning to watch the enemy. The Champion did not flinch, and followed her without hesitation. The Beast wanted to be a thing of teeth and claw, but Sabah thought otherwise. Her long legs swatted at the sands, sending up a cloud, and in that blinding curtain she struck. The heroine stood fast, both hands on the handle of her axe for her shield was long gone. The shining blade cut through the Beast's leg, but Sabah did not pause. She rolled over the heroine, and the wild joy of hearing bones creak and plate give filled her senses.

It was a wonder, that even after calling on an aspect the Champion was strong enough to throw her off. The Beast hit the wall and howled as her leg grew back, bone and flesh sprouting from the cut. The heroine's breastplate was dented, and her lips dripping with blood. It was enough to make the Beast *hungry*. Sabah stalked forward and waited for the heroine to charge. The sweep was not meant to hit her, just force her into the right place. Claws closed around the struggling heroine, and the Beast swung her down at the stands. Again and again and again, until there were a dozen gaping holes in the stone and only then did she toss the girl up in the air. The Champion rose higher and higher in the sky, until she touched a ceiling that wasn't and crack snaked across the firmament like it was a pane of glass.

The arena shattered, and the smells of smoke and death wafted to the Beast's nose. They were in the city again, where they'd first crossed. The Beast roared, and went for the kill.

Sabah watched.

—

It had been a very long time since Wekesa had found an opponent this troublesome. He'd grown arrogant in his old age, it seemed. Come to believe that a mere few layers of deception would be enough to keep a hound of the Heavens off his back. This entire battle was something a tactical mistake, in his eyes. This was far from the first time the Calamities split to deal with a heroic band, but the circumstances were not in their favour. Amadeus was adamant the White Knight had to die, however, and in this Warlock was not inclined to disagree. Not as long as Masego was attached to that Callowan slip of a girl. Promising as the young villains assembled around Catherine Foundling were, they were not ready to deal with this calibre of heroic opposition. Better to crush the Wizard to dust here so she would never be a threat to his son. Crushing a rune-covered stone in his palm, Warlock murmured an incantation and watched a bubble form around the Hedge Wizard. A derivative of the effect demons of Time could have, this, at least in theory. Actual observation of such a specimen would have been too dangerous even for him, as the Fourth Hell was nothing to trifle with.

The heroine was stuck, at least for now. He immediately gave ground while weaving High Arcana, the seven spears of red flame that formed sinking into the bubble. It was a crawl, from his perspective, but it would not be from hers. The Wizard moved, inch by inch, and the bubble popped. She had, it seemed, seized the guiding flows and broken them. Unfortunately for her, that did nothing about the spears. She twisted around most, but one took hit her in the shoulder and another in the leg. That should have crippled her, but the illusion she'd replaced herself with broke instead. The heroine stood a foot to the side, panting. Wekesa frowned and penned her into what he'd come to call a quicksand ward. It didn't prevent anything, not exactly. It simply made any exertion of power or movement much harder than it should be. Against a practitioner of limited power like her, forcing a burnout was a perfectly viable strategy.

"You killed my sister, you monstrous old fuck," the Wizard gasped. "You're not walking away from this."

Buying time to cast with distracting words. He'd pulled the same trick many, many times.

"I'm rather surprised it stuck," Wekesa noted. "I suppose once in a while luck smiles on the opposition."

Her spell flared into existence. The Liessen Chisel, by the looks of it. One of the better Callowan works, an old favourite of the Wizards of the West. It had been crafted specially to cut apart the stabilizing elements of wards, but to accomplish this it did require a certain of raw arcane power. She'd chosen poorly, given the ward around her. Her spell collapsed the ward and a heartbeat later her wrist bones both snapped. She screamed, but did not stop casting. Heroes had an irritating tolerance for pain. A mundane mage would have lost the thread of whatever they were casting when inflicted with such a distraction. High Arcana runes bloomed in front of the both of them.

"She was better than any of you," Hedge hissed. "She was *good*."

"She was Good," Wekesa corrected. "And evidently not quite better enough to avoid the Tyrant's ritual."

Her eyes went wide. Ah, she hadn't known that bit had she? There was more than one intent at work in this band of heroes. That light delay in working her will gave him the initiative. The red flares formed around the heroine's head, the intensity of the glow they produced varying wildly. She finished her spell a moment later and the moment the power took shape all three flares exploded into a cage of red. The green smoke she'd crafted went through the bars, but she was forced to dismiss it and create a cone of force around herself to avoid being incinerated. Wekesa's spell would have fed on both of her castings, which should earn him just long enough to craft something more powerful while she got rid of it. Duels between Gifted were very much a game of shatranj, in his experience. Reacting to the immediate movements of the pieces without glimpsing the long-term intent was a good way to end up dead.

"You're not invincible," the heroine barked. "I just need to find the right trick."

The red cage transmuted into red smoke a moment later, but he placed the last rune and four bands of transparent force formed around the wrists and ankles. They tightened without any need for prompting, crushing bone. Amusingly enough, what part of her wrists that was not powdered was now almost reset from the initial snapping. Warlock could have gone for a more lethal working, but he was wary of committing to such before she'd used her last aspect. Each of them had called on two, and the odds were that the loser of his duel would be the first to give in and call on the third. His own loss, he knew, was unlikely at this stage but very much a possibility. He'd already begun to prepare an exit strategy in case it came to that. The Hedge Wizard wrapped strings of sorcery around her limbs to keep them working, so naturally Wekesa inserted a little gift into the spell and turned them into angry snakes. He felt sorcery take hold of his own limbs and almost smiled. Ah, a transfer. Classic Stygian

work. He did not bother to craft an answer: the third layer of the wards on his person prevented the spell from ever going through.

"Have you ever considered," Warlock said, "that there is no *right trick*? That for all the gifts the Heavens have dropped onto your lap you could die here tonight?"

The blue pane of light hit her head-on, sending her stumbling to the ground, but her limbs shapeshifted into some sort of lycanthropic derivative by the looks of the hair. Interesting, considering under most recorded instances lycanthropy was a curse and not a natural state of being.

"They don't really encourage you to think about consequences, do they?" Wekesa continued blithely. "Your masters, that is. Perhaps you-"

He paused, then chuckled.

"Oh, you crafty child," he said. "You almost had me there. *Almost.*"

Hellfire was a drain, usually, but with the Red Skies so close to the boundary it was barely an effort to form them. The smell of brimstone filled the air and the crimson flares devoured the spell she'd formed while he talked. Not one he'd ever seen before, this, though the shape had similarities to Keteran formulas. Cascading of some sort? That would have been very dangerous, if it had it the wards on his body. Instead the hellfire engulfed the girl and she dropped to the ground. Another three heartbeats before she died of it, and he prepared to counter whatever trick she'd use to get away from certain death. That was not, as it turned out, what he should have prepared for. A beam of light hit the downed heroine, and it took Wekesa a heartbeat to parse out the sequence. This particular spell was, in theory, an offensive one. But it had a central sequence in the formula modelled after a miracle, which meant... the hellfire gutted out and the Tyrant grinned, lounging on his floating throne above them.

"I have come to betray you," the cripple cheerfully said.

"Alas, I am surprised," Warlock replied sardonically, and snapped his wrist.

The throne exploded and the boy went flying. That, he reflected, had been worth the seven hours of preparation. The Hedge Wizard was back on her feet. If they thought two of them would give them an advantage, they were sorely mistaken. They'd only given him more to work with. There was a soft sound at his back and the villain turned. An empty bottle of wine had been dropped on the



ground. The Wandering Bard, if he had to venture a guess. The heroine cursed and shot him a glare.

"I'll be back," she said, and wings sprouted from her back.

She shouldn't have taken the time to talk, he mused. He finished the spell before she'd risen more than a foot into the air, and the sliver of darkness touched her back. Every wound he'd inflicted with his sorcery tonight reopened and she dropped screaming. The Tyrant was back on his feet and trying something. Dangerous for his age, this one. Another runic stone broke under his grip and the bubble formed before both it and the villain disappeared. He should be stuck in Arcadia for at least a few moments. Things had grown out of control, here. If both enemy factions were on the move and even the Bard had played a hand – and wasn't it fascinating she would have had the chance to do that even with Assassin after her? – then the others were in danger. Time to wrap this up.

"**Reiterate**," the Hedge Wizard croaked out.

Ah, there was the third. Light collected around her body, a different take on the spell from earlier that had reformed her missing body parts. Warlock brought down his hand and the hellfire spear drove through her skull.

"Consequences," he reminded the dead heroine, and made sure there would not be enough left for a resurrection.

—

Amadeus was faintly amused at the notion of anyone trying to kill him with a bow when he was a known acquaintance of Ranger. The volley of Light arrows trailed behind him as he ran across the rooftops, splitting tiles and thatching both. An archery-based Name, this one. Warlock had been the one to kill the last Archer, but the green-eyed had tactics to deal with the likes of this. The shadow tendril tossed a brightstick in the White Knight's face, himself avoiding blinding by pushing a sliver of Name power into his eyes to blind them preventively. A heartbeat later he'd gained his sight back and three swords whistled towards the sides of the hero. *Change*. Still blind, Hanno batted away the blades with his bare hands and tugged at the length of one. Amadeus immediately cut it, forming a branch from another tendril to catch the falling blade before retracting all of them. Hand to hand fighter, if he was not mistaken. The Levantines were known for those. Black attacked again, eyes sharp. The enemy was shifting between skillsets more slowly, now that he'd gone beyond twenty. Thirty in a night might be his limit, though that was not an assumption to be relied on.

The blow dented his shield, and did not even require the Light to do so. Dangerous. Amadeus tossed the now mostly-useless tool in

his opponent's face and placed his blows. Blade to the ankle, avoided. Blade to armpit, parried bare-handed. The crossbow bolt from the last tendril hit the back of the knee but failed to penetrate. The villain clicked his tongue disapprovingly. That had been almost point-blank, meaning Name power had been at work. He ducked under an open palm that would have collapsed his throat, pivoted around the hero and rammed his blade under his arm. The White Knight danced away but his bare hand was cut by one of the blades coming around. The second should have punched through the back of the knee, Name or not, but the hero deftly stepped atop the blade and flipped away before Black could cut the connection and make him fall. Breathing hard, the White Knight raised both hands above his head and a greatsword of Light coalesced. *Change*. Not a known quantity, this skillset. There were greatsword wielders among the Lycaonese to the north of Procer, but the Principate was ever thin on Named.

A probe, then. It was worth sacrificing his last corpse for what would be learned. The undead charged out of a ruined house from behind the White Knight and was cut down without a second thought. From too far, Amadeus noted. The greatsword had lengthened. Not something he would be unable to deal with. The Black Knight advanced cautiously, shadows stirring behind him, and the greatsword rose again. The Light flared, and for a heartbeat the shadows he manipulated were lit out of existence. Amadeus did not miss a beat, for he'd been waiting on such a trick since the beginning of this duel. The few heroes he fought more than once all tried it, thinking him crippled without his additional limbs. The moment where White was occupied amplifying the Light, he accelerated and closed the distance. The greatsword came down, longer than before, and when he sidestepped the cut it twisted and turned to a lateral blow. He leapt and his armoured boot landed on the White Knight's faceplate. The roiling Light had the goblin steel smoking, but he used the man's head as a stepping stone and leapt again.

By then the shadows had returned to him.

The blade drove itself into the White Knight's back, piercing a lung before the Light burst out and scrapped it. Unfortunate, though inevitable. He only had so many blades hidden in his shadow, and two thirds were already gone. There was limited space inside, unfortunately, so decisions had to be made about what occupied it and there were tools more versatile than swords at his disposal. The White Knight's stance adjusted as Amadeus landed fluidly on the ground. *Change*. Seven heartbeats for the full shift, this time. The hero was overusing his aspect. A single longsword of Light, this time, held in one hand. The villain raised an eyebrow, recognizing the stance from the very recent past. The Lone Swordsman had used it, in Wekesa's illusory reproductions of the tussle in Summerholm. That had interesting implications. The White Knight was using the skills of Named,

then, as he had suspected. William of Greenbury had been largely self-taught, meaning there was no teacher, mundane or otherwise, to draw these skills from. It was quite possible Hanno was limited to heroes as well, dead ones in particular. That this could be done at all set an interesting precedent, one he would have to ask Warlock to look into.

Black let out a long breath. He was beginning to tire as well, though he'd conserved his strength as much as was physically possible. He was no stranger to working through tiredness, and how he would not to compensate for it. The White Knight strode forward at a swift pace and swung. Amadeus stepped out of the blow, circling cautiously. The Lone Swordsman had been heavily dependant on his blade, as he recalled, which was a limitation the one made of Light would only work partially around. Was it worth trading a minor wound for a more severe one? No, that was hurried thinking. The moment he began to bleed the tide began to turn. He feinted to the side and was immediately parried, or would have been if he hadn't dropped the sword. He twisted to catch it with his other hand and reversed the momentum, but he'd made a mistake. He'd taught Catherine too much, there were similarities in their ways of fighting. And the Lone Swordsman had duelled her several times before dying. The boot caught him on the shoulder and he only barely managed to land in a roll, backing away hurriedly as the other man advanced. He *had* wondered with the White Knight would rely on the skillset of a relatively green hero.

Hanno was not without cleverness, and unlike his first aspect this one he had fully mastered.

Still, this was an avenue to exploit as well as a weakness. Bringing back to mind the few sparring sessions he'd had with his apprentice before she left to quell the Liesse Rebellion, Amadeus adjusted his angle. Feint to the side, but he let the prompt parry pass him by. The second feint where he pretended to attempt a similar manoeuvre to before, the White Knight ignored and instead darted the sword of Light at his neck. Black caught the wrist and there was a heartbeat where the both of them were going through sets of instincts. The hero acted first, giving in to them and using a counter that would have worked perfectly if Amadeus had been inclined to continue fighting with the same fondness for close range as his student. The punch went wide, for he was already backing away and freeing the wrist. Instead he angled his blade to the side and carved into the White Knight's throat, the full weight of his body pivoting behind him. Blood sprayed out as he gave ground, closed by a burst of Light. That would have been a kill, on a lesser hero.

The White Knight opened his palm, and there was a silver coin in it. Amadeus let all other distractions fall to the wayside. The

coin spun in the air, one side with laurels and the other with crossed swords. It fell back on the palm, swords up.

"Amadeus of the Green Stretch, Black Knight of Praes," the White Knight said.

The point of the sword went through the roof of his mouth. Amadeus withdrew his bloodied blade and put the full strength of his Name behind the swing, but when he touched the neck it bounced off. Something infinitely larger than him swatted him down and he was thrown down onto the pavestones. They collapsed around him, the ground shaking. Seraphim. His plate was ripped open and he was bleeding from the eyes and mouth. The White Knight was collapsed as well, a mere five feet away, but it might as well have been a mile.

"Formulaic aspect," the Wandering Bard said. "You're a little young to know about those, I suppose. Should have let him finish, Big Guy. You don't interrupt the words of the Choir of Judgement without a price."

Black closed his eyes and sought out his surroundings for a corpse to raise. It was deserted of anything, dead or alive. He got on his knees, spewing blood and shaking. She could not intervene directly. If he managed to strike the final blow before the hero recovered, this could still be salvaged. Sinking into his Name he called on the shadows, but they did not heed his will. He'd exhausted all he had simply to survive the blow from the Seraphim, damn them and damn him and damn them all. Creation ripped open in the distance and howling winds spilled out. The Tyrant of Helike fell out, without visible wounds. Amadeus closed his eyes. *Solutions. Or a way to turn this into a mutual defeat, should this prove impossible.*

"Well isn't this is a mess, if you'll forgive my language," the Tyrant grinned. "Your ornery friend with the spells cost me a **Wish**, but it was worth it to see all this with my own eyes."

He still had an aspect. His other two were done, but Destroy could still affect the situation even if he could not. Affecting a physical structure? There was a half-collapsed house close enough he might be able to make it collapse onto the White Knight. The backlash from using the aspect without a speck of power to his Name would likely kill him. Alternatives were needed. The Tyrant strolled to the unconscious hero and with a groan slung his arm over his shoulder.

"I'll just be taking this," the odd-eyed boy said. "Don't mind me, carry on."

"Enemy," Amadeus croaked. "He is your enemy as well."

The Tyrant shrugged.

"Why do you think I'm doing this?" he said. "Given long enough you might figure out a way to kill him, and it's not like this one can do anything about it. Can't have that, can we?"

He pointed his thumb at the Bard, who waved cheerfully.

"Until next time, Black," the boy smiled, and dragged the hero away.

For a moment Amadeus considered collapsing the house, but this was mere petulance. With another Named shielding him, it was a guarantee the White Knight would survive. There was a loud crack from the rooftop. The Bard, he saw, had a bag on her knees. There were walnuts inside and she was breaking them open before popping them into her mouth.

"That's going to cost me, you know," the Named said casually. "It was supposed to be Hedge, but your Warlock is a fucking *terror* lemme tell you. Makes the old country proud."

Nothing good could come of listening to bardic Named, but he did not have the power left to shut down his senses.

"Would you like me to tell you how your friend is going to die?" the Bard asked.

"Bluff," he said. "Champion does not have the skill or story to handle Captain."

"She's not fighting Captain," the Bard said. "She's fighting a monster. 'swhy I picked Champion. The domain, big guy. She was bound to let out the Beast in that."

The White Knight was finally far enough that his amulet ceased taking effect.

"Warlock," the green-eyed man said. "The Bard is here. I am incapacitated. Sabah under threat."

"Amadeus," his oldest friend's voice replied. "She's..."

Black closed his eyes, and that was the only moment of weakness he allowed himself. The grief, the fury, it all went into the box and he closed it shut. All that remained was the cold clarity that was his only remaining safeguard. Green eyes opened, turning to the Bard. She broke another walnut, chewing it loudly.

"You still don't get the story that made it happen," she said.

"The caravans," he said, but did not elaborate.

There was something here he was missing. Pieces to the puzzle.

"You don't speak Levantine," the Bard said. "Or you'd know their word for maiden doesn't have a gender. Meaning's closer to 'virgin'."

Lack of sexual congress alone became the qualifier, if that was true. Every caravan had a single individual leading it, he remembered, men and women of different age and origins. Amadeus did not speak any of three major Levantine dialects, or even the Baalite tradertongue they'd been influenced by. There had been no need, and so many other things he had to learn.

"Monster took the maidens, and repeatedly, so that's one," the Wandering Bard said. "Now, I needed a monster-killer and she's the closest thing we have left to one of those. That's two."

He might as well have wielded the blade himself, he thought. He'd killed her one order at a time.

"Third, I needed the monster to be the one attacking," the Bard continued nonchalantly. "That was the easy one. Love, Amadeus. Love always fucks you over. All I had to do was suggest Champion join White after the wall fell, and your dear friend stepped in."

It wouldn't be enough, Amadeus thought. They'd only fought once before, and not on that story. There lacked weight. The old thing wearing a girl's face smiled, nut cracking in her hand.

"You could say it was a team effort, pulling it off," she said. "Our little secret, right?"

He did not reply. Engaging her any further could only be to his detriment. Warlock would be coming in all haste.

"I'd say sorry, but you brought this down on yourself," the Bard said. "I could probably destroy you in full, big guy, but that would take *time*. And effort. So I'm going to give you advice, instead."

The Wandering Bard leapt down from the rooftop, half-falling. She came close, kneeling at his side.

"Go home," she said. "Murder your little friend in the Tower and reign until someone puts a knife in your back. You're not as good at this game as you thought you were."

Hatred, Amadeus thought, was pointless. A bias that brought no benefit. And yet.

"But you won't, will you?" the other Named sighed. "You don't negotiate."

She rose back to her feet, brushing away walnut shards.

"I doubt we'll meet again," she said. "And fucking Kairos slipped one by me, so I'll have my hands full."

The Wandering Bard looked down at him, shoving her hands in her pockets.

"This one feels like a sin, doesn't it?" she mused. "Remember that, when the gears start turning."

## Chapter 33: Promises

*"No matter how good the horse, it can only bear one saddle."*  
-Callowan proverb

Our march through Summer had taken a month, from the perspective of Creation. Longer than I would have liked, but still miraculous compared to how long it would have taken me to come down from Denier the old fashioned way. Juniper agreed.

"Hugging," she sneered. "You've gotten soft, Foundling."

It was awkward embracing an orc with a solid two feet on me and broad as a barn, but I put the effort in. For all that the Hellhound mocked me, her grip was tight as well. We'd not gone this long without seeing each other since the Fifteenth was founded.

"You haven't," I said. "Gods, what do you eat? It's like they carved you out of slab of muscle."

She tried not to look pleased at that, but I'd been dealing with wilier operators of late. My general was a refreshingly open book. Ratface had apparently gone mad with power since I'd suborned the Smugglers' Guild to him, but since he'd abused his power to find me a fresh crate of Vale summer wine I was going to let that one go. Pouring myself a full cup of the pale wine, I allowed myself a little sigh of pleasure after sipping the alcohol. The stuff I'd dragged with me through Arcadia just wasn't the same, mostly cheap red vintages from the south. The two of us claimed the folding chairs in her own tent, not having bothered to gather people in the larger command pavilion. We'd have a proper briefing with the others at some point, but I wanted to talk with her before Marshal Ranker and the Deoraithe were dragged into the conversation.

"You'll have news for me," I said.

She grunted in assent, sniffing at her goblet full of aragh before downing it. A sure sign this was to be informal: Juniper never touched anything stronger than watered wine in the usual officer meetings.

"Holden is back into the Imperial fold," she announced. "General Istrid and her legions annihilated the fae garrison and are now fortifying the grounds."

It was one of Juniper's little quirks that she only ever referred to her mother by her rank even in private. As for what she'd told me, I was pleased. I needed to herd the Summer Court through known grounds and allowing them two footholds into Callow would have muddied the waters. Now they'd have to come through Dormer, which made it a great deal easier to plan for them. It was shame three legions and some of the finest battle commanders in the field had to be left where I couldn't use them, but anything less and I was fairly sure the Summer Court would try to force passage. After our last scrap they'd be wary of picking a fight with the Legions of Terror on a chosen field, though. They might win but their losses would leave them too weak to be able to handle the army I'd assembled. Some days it gave me pause, that I'd become someone who could use twelve thousand veterans of the Conquest as a mere deterrent. I'd come a long way from pit fights and waiting tables.

"Losses?" I asked.

"Light," the orc noted. "It was only the bare bones of a garrison. You kicked the hornet's nest when you invaded Summer."

"Oh, I pissed them off way beyond that," I grunted. "I've got a Princess of Summer in chains, Juniper. They'll be out for blood."

"Keeping that prisoner secure is a logistical nightmare, I'll have you know," the Hellhound growled. "Kilian and half our mages had to be set aside permanently so we'd never lack practitioners for the rotations."

"It'll be worth it," I said. "Largest bargaining chip I could get my hands on short of taking the seat of the Summer Court itself."

"You assume the fae can be bargained with," the Hellhound said.

"They always cut deals, it's in their nature," I said. "And if for once I can avoid having to pay the price by scraping myself raw, I'll have no complaints."

"Devils and fairies always get more than they give," the orc warned.

"Then it's a good thing I stole a lot of their shit," I replied bluntly. "I don't mind overpaying as long as I get what I want. I'm not going to get stuck in games with them, Juniper. I'll get exactly what I need not try for an inch more. Only way I can get away without getting fucked too hard."



"We'll get nothing if we're not winning," she said. "Don't lose sight of that."

That was the Praesi way, wasn't it? No, maybe not Praesi. The way of the Legions, Black's way. Compromise could be reached, but only from a position of strength. On their own terms. Our way, I must confess. Kilian hadn't been wrong when she'd said I had no taste to compromise when I could get things how I wanted them instead.

"Masego's getting ready for the Queen," I noted. "Or as much as he can, with an entity like her."

"The Hierophant now, I hear," Juniper said. "Fancy Name. Never heard of it before."

There was hint of doubt there. Older Names, those better known, tended to be more powerful than relative outliers like my friend's. They'd accumulated more weight over the centuries, greater legends to draw from.

"He'll pull through," I said. "Always does. But I'll admit, for this kind of work I almost wish Diabolist was on our side. There's a lot of bad to be said about the old school, but they have a peerless record when it comes to things like this."

"She might pull it off," the Hellhound said. "But whatever she gained from that victory she'd use to screw us the moment the battle was over."

"I know," I sighed. "The competence doesn't come without the rabid crazy. And speaking of dear old Akua, where the Hells is she?"

"We have no idea," Juniper grunted. "Scrying doesn't work, and the last time we had eyes on her was when she took Liesse above the clouds. She could be anywhere by now."

I frowned.

"She can't stay up there forever," I said. "She's got over a hundred thousand mouths to feed, and if she starts dragging civilians to altars she'll have riots on her hands."

I wasn't sure what a riot would look like a dozen leagues above solid ground, but I'd guess it wouldn't be pretty. Akua's mind was like a sack of angry, treacherous badgers but she wasn't stupid. She had pretty thick blinders on, sure, but I'd never seen one of her schemes collapse on its own. She wouldn't be nearly as dangerous if they did.

"Ratface says she can manage two months at most," the Hellhound said. "A guess based on what she reported to your Ruling Council

when she was Governess, with the assumption she was lying through her teeth on the numbers."

I'd trust the Taghreb's judgement in this. He was a middling tactician at best but when it came to supplies and logistics, there was no better man in the Fifteenth. I'd been lucky to get my hands on him back at the College, and even Juniper occasionally offered praise of his abilities. Never where he could hear, and always tempered with generous criticism about his more underhanded dealings, but that my general said anything at all was telling.

"So now we have to guess at the where she'll be coming down," I said.

"We don't know enough about what she's after to be remotely accurate," the Hellhound grunted. "Will she be after supplies? If so, Vale will likely be the target. Is she aiming to cripple the Legions in Callow, to carve a realm from the ruins of the south? If so, she must turn her eyes to Holden."

"Or she could be after sorcery," I said.

"Legion mages don't have the learning to even try to unpack that," Juniper said. "You'll need the Hierophant to write a report about possible targets."

Then I'd need Hakram to go through it and cut out all the unnecessary parts Masego would have added, I noted silently. Odds were Hierophant would write me a damned volume with an annex twice as thick. The Soninke was ridiculously wordy, when given ink and parchment. I drank deep from my cup, mood soured.

"So we have a month before the Queen of Summer can enter Creation, if Masego is to be believed," I said. "Then another month before Akua drops down from the sky to fuck everything up, as is her sacred and solemn duty."

"Busy year," Juniper snorted.

"At least Procer hasn't invaded," I said, trying for a bright side. "And no one's unleashed a demon in a year."

"High Lady Tasia did, in Wolof," the orc reminded me.

"I can't believe I have to lower my standards lower than they already are," I complained. "Well, nobody's opened a permanent portal into the Hells. There. I refused to go any lower."

"Give it time," Juniper grinned, ivory fangs flaring.

She'd meant it as a jest, but there was too much truth to it for me to laugh.

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It would be two days before the armies marched south, beginning the trek to Dormer. We were still waiting on supplies and we had a horde of wounded to deal with. I could have begun to put a dent into the pile of urgent scrolls that no doubt awaited me, but for tonight I decided I'd done enough. My body could go on, but I was exhausted in a deeper way. There were only so many twists and turns I could take before it was too much. I slogged my way back to my tent, painfully aware that no one would be awaiting me inside. I'd passed by Ratface's quarters beforehand and ignored his many requests for me to look at the books in favour of bullying him to hand me another bottle. Juniper and I had polished off the last one after she'd finished her aragh, talking for a few hours until it got dark. It still amazed me that the two of us had gone from being at each other's throats to people who could actually enjoy the other's company, no matter how much she insisted otherwise. It was rare thing for me to seek two bottles in a day, but I had a feeling I'd need another drink if I was going to sleep at all tonight. I could still smell the incinerated corpses of the soldiers I'd failed in Arcadia, the hundreds that had died at the whim of two vicious creatures beyond my understanding.

There were Gallowborne around my tent and I spent a few moments chatting with them before going inside. They'd gotten off light from the last battle in Arcadia, and Tribune Farrier was already recruiting to fill the ranks left empty by the dead. I hoped the volunteers would understand what they were in for. I'd gotten half my retinue killed because I'd been sloppy and arrogant, and while I didn't intend to ever make that mistake again there were harder fights ahead. I wished Black was there so he could tell me about his own guard. He'd had his for decades, he must have known ways to keep them safe without making them irrelevant. Or maybe he didn't. My teacher might not share my qualms about people being killed in his name, not even people he knew. I'd gotten harsher in the last few years but I was still a long way from being iron as cold as the Black Knight. There was no candle lit in my tent, but to a Named that made no difference. That was why I saw the silhouette sitting on the edge of my cot, and though for a hopeful moment I thought it was Kilian the notion disappeared when the details sunk in.

It was a woman. Soninke, dark eyes, and while shy of pretty not exactly ugly. I'd seen her before, known her under the name of Lady Naibu. *Lady Deputy*, in Mtethwa. My hand left the grip of my sword and I inclined my head respectfully.

"Your Most Dreadful Majesty," I said.

This was Empress Malicia's own puppet, the soulless flesh simulacrum she could use to be two places at once.

"I've already told you there is no need for such formality," the Empress dismissed, using someone else's hands.

I glanced at the flaps of the tent but the Gallowborne had yet to move.

"You may consider this a private audience, Catherine," Malicia smiled.

Fuck. My tent was in the middle of an army over thirty thousand strong. The boundaries of the Fifteenth's fortified camp were set with wards Masego had designed personally. I had thousands of sharp-eyed goblins running around. And yet there she was, on my own godsdamned bed. This could have been an assassin and no one would ever have known. I wasn't ashamed to say that it was almost enough to scare me, this reminder about how far the Empress' reach went. I set the bottle on the table and ripped out the cork.

"A glass as well, if you please," the Empress said. "It has been ages since I've tried anything from Vale."

And she knew my favourite wine. I wasn't even surprised, to be honest. Black had already told me he'd had a file about me before I ever became the Squire, and it was pretty much a given the Empress would have one twice as thick somewhere in the Tower. I poured her a goblet as well and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said. "I hear you've finally met Ranger."

I blinked.

"This is turning out a lot more civil of a conversation than I expected," I frankly said.

The meat-puppet chuckled. It would not do forget that was what I was looking at, to be taken in by the charm and the pleasantries. I was dealing with a woman who'd hollowed out a body of its immortal soul for the sake of convenient conversation.

"Did you expect me to come storming in, demanding justifications?" she said. "The Empire is a balancing act, Catherine. I do not introduce weight without careful consideration."

There was silence after that, until I realized she was still expecting to answer her first sentence. Gods, I was exhausted. And near enough to tipsy.

"She came real close to killing me," I said. "Just for suggesting I could help her in a fight, if I'm not mistaken. She's not much like the stories."

"I am not particularly fond of her myself," the Empress said. "And not only because she attempted to talk Amadeus into running me through and seizing the throne after the Conquest."

I grimaced. I'd gotten hints from Scribe there'd been undercurrents of that in the past, but never heard it so bluntly stated before. Or been sure the Empress knew of it.

"She's a monster," I said. "Bad as the Diabolist, in her own way. I don't get why Black likes her so much."

"Love," the Empress said. "It is love, my dear. She's an extraordinary creature, I'll grant that. Her little philosophy is what drew him in, and eventually what parted them."

I raised an eyebrow. That the puppet managed to see that in the still-dark tent was another detail I filed away for the future.

"Be all you can be," Malicia murmured. "Do anything you want. If someone stands in your way, end them. If you cannot, respect that rule until you can end them."

"That's just anarchy," I said. "I won't lie and say I don't break laws when it's useful, but I still recognize there's a need for them."

"It is easy to believe your whims are the only law of Creation, when you grow powerful enough," the Empress replied. "She will kill herself sooner or later, crossing something she could not afford to cross."

"She got into a death match with the Summer Queen," I said. "I doubt that'll do the trick but she won't walk it off easy."

I was getting tired of standing up with a goblet in hand, so I downed the wine and grabbed a chair. I set it to face the Empress, sagging against the wooden frame.

"Hye always did overestimate herself," Malicia shrugged. "A matter of little import, in the end. She's remained in her little hovel in the woods for decades and shows no sign of greater ambitions."

I could have told her otherwise. That Archer believed her teacher was the best thing to come along since the Gods had whelped Creation, that I'd lost three hundred soldiers because Ranger couldn't be fucked to do anything about them. But those words I kept for people I trusted. I respected the Empress, what she'd accomplished and the people she'd crushed to get where she was, but I didn't trust her in the slightest. So instead I leant over to grab the bottle and filled my goblet. Fishing out a satchel of wakeleaf from my pocket, I grabbed my pipe as well and looked at Malicia.

"Do you mind?" I asked.

"By all means," she said. "A filthy habit, but one I tolerated in Wekesa for over forty years."

Good enough. I struck the match and lit the dragonbone pipe, taking a deep breath. Time to get to the meat of this conversation, I believed.

"I created a chivalric order," I said, and blew out a stream of smoke.

"I am aware," the puppet replied. "The obtainment of cavalry, I do not begrudge you. We've never managed to secure more horses than needed to replenish the ranks of the Thirteenth Legion without risking rebellion. But this is more than cavalry. It is a Callowan institution."

"You tried to kill it," I said bluntly. "The both of you. It failed, so I'm making use of it instead."

Malicia raised an eyebrow.

"Another decade and it would have disappeared painlessly," she said. "It takes coin to train armed men, Catherine. Their means had to be running low, especially given the numbers you managed to gather."

That was true enough, and the reason the knights had approached me in the first place. A little more honesty, then. I drank from my cup and chose my words carefully.

"I won't allow them to disappear," I said. "They're a keystone of what Callow should be."

"There lies the issue, my dear," the Empress said. "The abolition of the Imperial governorships, I can stomach. You will have to be publically given sanction for it and pay for the gain of authority, but as a tool they have effectively run their course. The forging anew of a Callowan state, however, is a different matter. In large part your people have defined themselves as nation by their resistance to outside invaders. Some of which currently occupy the country."

I pulled at the pipe, inhaled the bitter smoke and let it out.

"I've never called for rebellion against Praes," I finally said.

"That is irrelevant, and untrue besides," she replied flatly. "You've preached the destruction of the aristocracy of the Wasteland, which cannot feasibly be achieved without warfare. That is rebellion, no matter your semantics. Even if you personally never raise your banner, Catherine, you will not live forever. Your successors will inherit a well-armed and

centralized ethnically Callowan state, trained at the expense of Praesi gold in the methods of the Legions. It is a certainty they will seek independence, by force of arms if need be."

I grimaced. She wasn't wrong, not entirely. Fifty years for now, if I got myself killed, I could easily see the next Governor-General call on mostly Callowan legions to give Praes the boot. And it was not the outcome I wanted, seductive as the idea of a resurgent Kingdom was sometimes. Even if they managed to win, which I knew better to assume, half the country would be ruined for a generation. And should they succeed, it would just be going back to the old cycle of invasion and death, the plague on my birthplace I'd taken it upon myself to end.

"I tried the Ruling Council," I said. "It *failed*, Malicia. Badly."

"You botched the Ruling Council," she corrected. "It could have been in the palm of your hand, but you disdained the methods to see this through. All the while chipping at Praesi authority by hanging one governor after another. It was a functional method of rule, Squire. You dislike Wasteland influence, but you seem to forget that we *won* the Conquest. I've already compromised a great deal. Almost more than is reasonable."

"You also engineered the destruction of an entire culture," I bit back. "You won, yeah. But I'm not in this seat across from you because of my sunny personality. I'm here because you want Callow to be brought into the fold without having to put down another dozen rebellion and assorted heroes. You had to know there would be costs to that."

"Then present me with alternatives," Malicia said. "I could attempt to craft one myself, in truth, but that would be a mistake. If you want to hold the power and authority you do, both granted to you by the Tower, then prove you deserve them. You are not a partner, if I have to salvage your every blunder. You are a burden."

That was harsh, but I recognized it for what it was. An invitation. An opportunity to actually become a player in Imperial politics. That wasn't the kind of offer that came twice in a lifetime. I set aside the half-empty cup and breathed out the wakeleaf smoke.

"Name me Vicequeen of Callow," I said.

"An empty title," she replied. "Your Governess-General will be doing the governing while you lead your legion."

"I won't keep it long," I said. "A few years at most. And you'll have set the precedent that the Tower appoints them."

She did not reply but studied me instead, which I took as prompting to continue.

"They have to be Callowan, that's what I ask," I said. "You still get to pick someone that won't hinder Praesi interests."

"And the knights?" she said.

"Folded into the Legions," I said. "Malicia, you and Black have occupied this country but you haven't really made *use* of it. You got taxes out of the governorships, but what else? If all you want is to shake a land until gold comes out, there's easier targets. You can still get your cut from the viceroy, but there's so much more that could be had. How many Callowans are really in the Legions, aside from the Fifteenth? There should be a portion in every one, even those in the Wasteland. Callow has population on par with Praes, and if you don't need to use your armies to keep it in check that population goes to fill your armies. You could get cavalry that doesn't need to eat its full weight in meat every month. Hells, you could start fielding priests with the Legions if you name someone who has pull with the House of Light. But to get all that, you need someone Callowans will actually *listen* to."

"And you can accomplish all this?" the Empress said. "Without breaking from the Tower?"

"Yes," I said hoarsely. "No matter who gets in my way. Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation."

On the second evening I'd ever spent with Black, I'd remembered a sermon from the House of Light. One about the really dangerous devils. How they gave you exactly what you wanted, and let you find your own way to the Hells with it.

I took her hand anyway, Gods forgive me.

## Chapter 34: Talks

*"Tonight we must speak of Callow, that stubborn graveyard of empires. Princes and princesses of Procer, we must now admit this truth: we have lost an entire kingdom to peasants and bandits."*

– Beginning of First Princess Éloïse of Aequitan's speech to the Highest Assembly, on the subject of withdrawal from occupied Callow

"HAIL!"

Three thousand swords rose in salute, bare steel shining under the sun. I'd read about this, in what few records of the knightly orders still remained. A steel avenue, they called it. An old tradition born under Elizabeth Alban when the Queen of Blades had



annexed almost a fourth of what was now Procer in a series of lightning-quick campaigns. It had only ever been used to honour ruling kings and queens of Callow, and now I was being greeted with one. The bluntness of that defiance was almost refreshing, since they had no idea I'd just been granted vicequeenship of the Callow. I'd talked a good game to the Empress, but I wasn't unaware that by founding the Order of Broken Bells I'd saddled a hungry tiger. Now I had to ride it, or be dragged down and devoured. I wondered if rulers ever truly managed to be in control, sometimes. Malicia and Black certainly gave off the impression they were, but how much of that was a front? The more authority I gained the less I felt like I held the reins.

Brandon Talbot looked better than he had last time I'd seen him, a filthy prisoner in the underground gaols of Marchford. His dark beard was cropped closely, his hair combed with care and he now stood with his back straight. Proudly. I had no trouble believing a woman like the Countess Marchford had thought he would make a worthy successor to her title. His plate was of Callowan make, of lesser steel than what the Imperial forges could make but covered in hymns of the House of Light. Old, it was easy to tell, but recently polished and very well-maintained. There was no telling it had been used in battle a mere few days ago, much less against the likes of the Summer Court. I strode down the steel avenue and he fell in at my side.

"I hear congratulations are in order," I said.

The man inclined his head.

"I will only remain as Grandmaster of the order for a few years, Your Grace," he replied. "Until a younger candidate can be raised to take the title."

He'd been elected by acclaim, as I understood it, in large part because he'd been the one mad enough to walk into Marchford unarmed back when Juniper was running it. That kind of risk-taking always earned some respect from soldiers, in my experience, especially with the kind of stakes he'd been playing for. Another hail sounded when we passed the end of the twin rows, headed for open pavilion that was the command tent for the Order of Broken Bells. A pair of tall banners trailed the wind to the sides, showing a pair of cracked bronze bells set on black.

"We would have flown your banner as well, Your Grace, but your quartermaster informed us you have none," he said.

I kinda wished I'd been there for that conversation, Ratface of all people trying to explain to a highborn that I might have a demesne but I'd not actually bothered to get any of the symbols a proper noble considered their due.

"Never got around to it," I said, entering the pavilion.

Robber had put a goat skull on a pike and tried to pass it for my heraldry, but Hakram had him assigned to latrine duty for a week in reprisal. Ah, Adjutant. He'd taken to my petty kind of justice like a wolf to a limping lamb.

"House Talbot has been dissolved, but it would be an honour for you to claim our sigil," the man suggested.

An arched silver bridge set on blue, if I remembered correctly. There was worst heraldry to be had – the rulers of Hedges had sheep as theirs, which boggled my mind – but it wasn't *mine*.

"That won't be necessary," I said politely.

No wine at the table in here. Right. Callowans didn't usually start drinking until the evening, and and it wasn't even noon yet. Even if the knights had been dispersed in the countryside for over two decades, I couldn't help but notice their chairs were nicer than mine. Except the one I'd looted from Summer, anyway. That one was sinfully comfortable and I actually slept better in it than my own cot. I took the seat at the head at the table and Grandmaster Talbot seated himself at my right. I slapped down a sheath of leather on the table and took out the parchments within, Aisha's beautiful Lower Miezian cursive filling it.

"You've officially been granted the rank of commander in the Fifteenth Legion, Grandmaster Talbot," I said. "You've got more three times the men under you a commander usually does but you don't qualify for legate rank, much less general."

"Because I am Callowan," he smiled thinly.

"Because you never went through the War College," I corrected. "You don't know shit about Legion tactics. You'll still counted as a member of the general staff, though, so you'll be in the high-level briefings as the commander of our cavalry contingent."

Aisha had bitterly complained about the bureaucratic nightmare that was getting a mere commander that kind of clearance, but she'd gotten it done anyway. I could have just waved around my seal and gotten it done on my personal authority as the Squire, but I didn't want to go that far unless I was forced to. Juniper already gave me enough lectures about how far we'd strayed from traditional Legion structure, and it would look better to the rest of the generals out there if I at least pretended I cared about the proper way things were done. The noble read through the papers, then glanced up.

"This states I have been given leave to organize the Order's command hierarchy as I wish," he said.

"The Empire doesn't have a precedent for a cavalry contingent this large," I said. "Even the Thirteenth Legion only has a thousand riders."

He nodded slowly.

"Knightly orders were limited to a thousand full-fledged knights, under House Fairfax," Grandmaster Talbot said. "One of the reasons there was such a wide variety."

I was a little amused he was tiptoeing around the reason for that. Under the Alban dynasty the orders had been much larger, but there'd been a bunch of small-scale conflicts between them and nobles, both sides arguing the other was overreaching their authority. Triumphant had razed the whole squabble to the ground, but when it had begun to pop up under Eleanor Fairfax's grandson he'd stripped the orders of their fortress holdings and severely limited their size. A dozen of small orders was a lot less dangerous to the nobility than three or four large ones, and easier to fold under the command of the crown when invaders came knocking. Traditionally it was the crown prince or princess who'd held command, a tradition that ended when Juniper's mother had shattered the charges of the Shining Prince at the Fields of Streges right before a goblin slit his throat.

"Banners of a thousand," Brandon finally said. "Under my ultimate command. We still have many squires in our ranks, and a single battle was not enough to season them."

"Get it written properly," I ordered. "And get the parchments to Staff Tribune Bishara before nightfall. She'll be expecting them."

"A very talented woman," Talbot said approvingly.

There was a look in the man's eyes I wasn't unfamiliar with. Well, Aisha was exceedingly pretty. I doubted she'd be interested in a Callowan twice her age, but him looking wouldn't hurt anyone as long as he kept it mannerly.

"A detachment of five hundred could be arranged to serve as your personal guard," he said, putting away the parchments.

"I already have a retinue," I said, raising an eyebrow. "Red shields, golden noose on them? They're hard to miss."

"The 'Gallowborne', yes," he said. "Criminals and Praesi."

"I've trained a lot of them myself," I said calmly. "On foot, I'd put any of them against three of yours. I doubt there's any company on Calernia that's been through rougher fights."

"They're sharp men, I'm sure," the Grandmaster said. "But a match for five hundred knights of Callow?"

I drummed my fingers against the table.

"The Gallowborne," I said, forcing the calm to stay even as the temperature in the pavilion descended sharply, "are my retinue. They've been mine since I snatched them from the gallows, Talbot. They've bled for me. They've *died* for me. And they will remain at my side until they can no longer serve."

I was uncomfortable with how possessive that had sounded, and the bearded man did not speak of the matter any further. Eager for a change of subject, I cleared my throat.

"You told Adjutant you needed to speak with me," I said.

There was a reason it wasn't Hakram handing him the paperwork, and it wasn't because I'd been looking for a sword salute. Though I wasn't complaining I'd gotten one, either.

"There are matters it has been brought to my attention you left unfinished, Your Grace," he said. "I understand we are at war, but they still need to be dealt with in haste."

I leaned against the back of my chair.

"I'm listening," I allowed.

"House Foundling," he said, and grimaced. "Forgive me, but that it an orphan's name. It is not fit for the ruling dynasty of Callow."

"What a funny coincidence," I drawled. "I *am* an orphan."

"You share that name with thousands of others," he said. "Your Grace, you must consider the difficulties this will cause. Taking a reigning name is in order."

I drummed my fingers against the table, again. A sliver of my opinion of this whole bullshit must have shown on my face, because the knight had to repress a flinch.

"As of last night, I am the Vicequeen of Callow by official sanction of Her Dread Majesty Malicia, First of Her Name," I said. "Not *queen*, though. My successor to the title will be chosen by the Tower, when I see fit to surrender that position. There's no need for a fancy dynastic name."

"Your Grace-" he began.

"The title will remain in Callowan hands," I interrupted flatly. "Compromise was reached. Leave it at that. To be frank, Talbot, you're not really qualified to weigh in about the shit that goes

on that high up. I've survived dealing with the High Lords by stabbing them repeatedly and publicly until they got cautious. They would swallow *you* whole and spit out your bones."

He seemed a little offended by the brusqueness of that, but he'd have to make his peace with it. What I'd said was very much true. If I put this poor bastard in a room with Akua Sahelian she'd have him on permanent puppet strings before a quarter hour had passed.

"Your line will still rule Marchford in perpetuity," he said. "The name matters, Your Grace."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"I became Named as Catherine Foundling," I said flatly. "I will die with that name as well."

"There must be records of your birth parents," he tried desperately. "A Deoraithe name will not be as well received, but it is still something."

"As far as I'm concerned, the closest thing I'll ever have to a father is down south killing fools," I replied coldly. "And he doesn't have a last name. Born a farmer, you see. As for the people who birthed me, they are strangers. I owe them nothing and will take nothing from them."

The man bit his tongue, but it was clear he wanted to argue.

"I am not a noble, Talbot," I said. "I don't really like them, as a rule. No offence meant to you in particular. I've bled for every inch of power I have, and the notion of anybody just... inheriting theirs has grown repulsive to me. There will be no restoration of highborn power in Callow."

"You will still reign, Your Grace," he said. "You must realize that certain measures have to be taken to cement your legitimacy."

I peered at him closely, and read the deeper hesitation there.

"Oh Gods," I said. "You want me to get married."

"The baron of Hedges has a son your age," he pressed on. "All the branches of House Fairfax were exterminated after the Conquest, but there are remains of other ancient lines. Duchess Kegan is the foremost remaining Callowan noble, and a direct marriage alliance with the House of Iarsmai through a cousin would yield great benefits."

"You can't be serious," I said, mildly horrified.

"I am given to understand you might prefer the company of women," he said delicately. "There are certain miracles known to the House of Light that could make such an arrangement feasible."

"I go both ways," I replied faintly. "But that's not the issue here. I have a – I'm not looking for anyone, Talbot."

"I have heard that you keep company with a Duni, yes," he hinted. "You would not be the first ruler of Callow to keep a paramour, if you'll forgive my crassness."

Merciless Gods. I was eighteen, so I supposed in the eyes of the remaining nobles I was fair game in the marriage alliance market. Callowans got married a lot later than Praesi, since unlike the Wastelanders we didn't actually *breed* bloodlines, but nobles did tend to be ahead of the curve in that regard.

"That's not happening," I said flatly. "And this conversation is over."

I wasn't getting saddled with a lordling or a child anytime soon, no matter what people might want. I honestly wasn't sure I wanted to ever have kids, and even if I did make that decision down the line it wouldn't be to pat some fucking aristocrats on the back. There were a lot of things I was willing to bargain with, but who shared my bed wasn't one of them. Brandon Talbot's lips thinned, but he did not argue.

"I'll get heraldry done," I sighed, throwing him a bone as I rose to my feet. "Get the paperwork to Aisha, Grandmaster. We'll speak again at the staff meeting."

I could not get out of that pavilion quickly enough.

—

I'd chosen to hold this meeting under the stars, since I felt most comfortable at night these days. The bonfire crackled, flames high and occasionally licking at the roots of the tall oak that oversaw our little quiet corner of Creation. Masego had slapped down some complicated-looking wards the moment he'd arrived, not even bothering to vocalize an incantation. His new Name came with some perks apparently. I took a moment to let this all settle in. It was the first time all five of us were in the same place, in Creation at least.

Archer was seated on a wide branch above us, because she never wasted an occasion to literally look down on everyone else, and with a knife in hand she was carving what looked like a sphere out of dark wood. Her ochre skin looked ever darker at night, and though she'd left her longcoat and silver mail behind in favour of a woollen brown tunic and trousers, she'd kept the dark green scarf that she usually covered her lower face with

around her neck. I had a much better look at the curves on her, without the armour on, and she winked when she saw me looking. I turned away. Because it was in Archer's nature to be a bloody pest at all times, she made a point out of dropping the wood shavings on Masego's head until he got tired of asking her to stop and put up a translucent pane of sorcery over his head.

Hierophant himself looked... strange. Familiar yet different. He wore a black cloth blindfold over his glass eyes, but sometimes bits of red and yellow light could be glimpsed through it. His hair was still long and braided but the shining trinkets he'd once worn in them had been replaced by dull bars of iron carved with runes. His usually colourful robes had been traded a black tunic that made him look like a chubby crow when he was sitting, but actually lent him something of a presence when he was on his feet. The Legion-issue boots were an amusing last touch to the ensemble, worn down as they were. His fingers kept twitching, as if to reach out for something no one else could see.

Hakram sat at his side, his heavy plate made something else entirely by the ravages of the battles we'd been through. The goblin steel had been darkened by Summer flame, twisted by heat not of Creation, and though it still fit with padding under the metal the appearance reminded me of the steps leading to the Tower. The obsidian that had been warped by sorcery, shaped into silhouettes of weeping men and women one must tread on to rise. Adjutant had gone through the crucible of fire and become stronger for it. His Name pulsed steady to my senses, firm yet oddly serene. His hand of bones was eerily still, reeking of dark sorcery anchored into his very Name. His eyes were dark and still as ponds, the fangs glinting in firelight still bloody from his supper.

Thief sat across the fire from me. I'd never been in her presence long enough to notice before, but she didn't hold herself like a commoner. I'd had etiquette lessons at the orphanage and I recognized the same marks on her, in the way she kept her wrists straight and her back as if leaning against a high chair. Her leathers were loose, but I could tell we shared a body shape. She was taller than me, since it was basically divine mandate that everyone but goblins be, but not by as much as the other. Dark hair and blue-grey eyes that were always moving, always looking for movement. Pale fingers were toying with a carving knife that was clearly sapper issue: she has wandering hands, this one, and a habit of picking up knickknacks. Must have been part of her Name, because it seemed too compulsive for a mere habit.

Five Named were sitting around the fire. That was, I knew, no small thing. Even more now that Ranger had tossed us a name, turning the curse of the Queen of Summer into something more. The Woe, she'd called us. It had felt like a pivot then and still did now, the beginning of something larger. What it would be, I was

almost scared to find out. Hakram tossed up a wineskin at Archer, which was enough to distract her from pissing off Masego for a bit. I took that as my cue to begin.

"So, on our first outing together we robbed Summer of what appears to be its literal sun, before capturing a princess of the blood," I said. "I'm not one for omens, but it strikes me as a good note to begin on."

"Lies and violence," Archer cheered, dropping the wineskin on Masego's shield.

The Soninke mage snatched it, taking a gulp and coughing when it went down the wrong pipe. Apparently a fresh Name didn't mean he could handle drink any better. Good to know. I felt Thief glance at me, raising any eyebrow at what Archer had said.

"Archer is a horrid wench, and whatever she says about mottos is not to be trusted," I stated.

"Well, it's still better than sullen," the Named in question mused.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"I expected something more... professional," the Thief finally said.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Did the Lone Swordsman run that kind of crew?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"No," the heroine conceded, "but your band was a step ahead of us the whole time. I always thought it would be rather business-like, on your side."

"You thought we were a step ahead?" Masego croaked, wiping his mouth.

Hakram snorted.

"We strolled from one disaster to another, trying to keep the fires from spreading," the orc said, sounding amused. "Mostly fires not of our making, I'll add."

"Haven't been in this outfit for long," Archer said, "but it hasn't struck me as overburdened with plans."

"That's going a little far," I intervened, mildly offended.

"We got into Skade by writing on a scrap of parchment that we could, Catherine," she pointed out. "Don't get me wrong, I'm on



board with our whole 'that's stupid enough they'll never see it coming' way of going at it. But masterful schemers we are not."

"You had us dead to rights at Summerholm," Thief frowned.

"We only understood what was happening after the city was on fire," Masego said.

"And we got blamed for that, after," Hakram added.

"Everything in Liesse unfolded according to your plan," Thief tried.

"Arguably. Though she did get killed," Adjutant said.

Archer's eyes swerved to me.

"Wait, you *died*? Have you been undead this while time?" she asked. "You don't look it."

"Resurrected," I replied.

She looked even more dubious.

"You're a villain, Cat," she said. "That's not exactly in your wheelhouse."

"Yeah, the Hashmallim weren't real pleased about it either," I grunted. "They threw a fucking fit."

"Is that how that happened?" Thief frowned. "I did wonder. You talked a Choir into breathing second life into you?"

"Talked is a strong word," I mused.

"We've settled on 'bullied'," Hierophant contributed helpfully.

"You bullied," the Thief said slowly, "the entire Choir of Contrition. Into resurrecting a villain actively trying to oppose them."

"Not even the Lady of the Lake fucks around with angels," Archer said approvingly. "That's actually impressive."

"Don't bring Ranger into this," I grunted. "She came a heartbeat away from slicing my throat open the only time we met."

"Oh, she's always like that," the other woman dismissed. "Don't take it personally. She once threw Tinkles out a window for hitting on a trader girl instead of practicing his stances."

"I'm glad he was sloppy, then," I admitted. "Hunter was hard enough to put down as he was."

Thief blinked, then looked up at the woman on the branch.

"I forgot," she said. "You are an apprentice of the Ranger as well. You must have known him well."

"He was only around for a few years before joining up with your little rebellion," Archer shrugged. "Of the Lady's five pupils he was always the odd one out. Not surprised he ran off, though it was still monumentally stupid."

"He was," Thief began, looking for a diplomatic word, "different."

"Half-naked," I said. "Half-naked is the term you're looking for."

"I never minded the sights, Catherine," Archer grinned. "The man had a body worth a stare. The bells, though, and the tattoos? Gods, it was like he was trying to ruin his looks."

"The tattoos weren't a Refuge tradition?" Thief asked, looking surprised.

"Is *that* what he said?" Archer snorted. "No, they aren't."

Masego cleared his throat politely.

"This conversation is both baffling and horribly tedious to me," he informed us. "I believe you were addressing us, Catherine?"

"Right," I said, and immediately delegated. "Hakram."

The tall orc straightened, putting aside the wineskin he'd been hogging this whole time. Thief had thawed a bit when we talked, but her guard went right back up when she turned to him. There was story there, I thought. Adjutant must have had one of his little talks with her at some point. I trusted him, so I wouldn't meddle, but I'd have some questions to ask my second.

"We currently have two threats that must be dealt with," Hakram gravelled. "The first is Summer Court and its queen. The second is Akua Sahelian, lately the Diabolist."

"The villain that let the devils loose on Liesse," Thief said, eyes gone cold.

"That's the one," I said. "And believe me, devils are some of the milder stuff she's thrown at us in the past. You've gone to the city yourself, I hear. You saw what she's up to."

"Some sort of ritual," the skinny Callowan said. "It involves Deoraithe that are part of the Watch, and that's about all I know."

I glanced at Masego, who somehow picked up on it. That was going to keep being creepy for a while.

"While I've not conducted such experiments myself, I've read the notes my father has on the Watch," the mage said. "They are connected to a deity of unknown nature, and gain their supernatural abilities by binding themselves to it through rituals they call Oaths."

"Our best guess at the moment is that the Diabolist is trying to get at the deity through them," I said.

"Considering the massive size of the array she created in the city," Masego said, "she will need at least a lesser god to empower it. The scale of the effect might be comparable to that of the creation of the Kingdom of the Dead."

"Liesse is also currently flying," Hakram said. "Which will make it difficult to assault. That aside, the city's current location is a mystery."

I met Thief's eyes.

"I'll have my people look into it," she said.

I nodded.

"Much as I hate giving Akua a reprieve, she's not the most pressing threat at the moment," I said. "Summer's out for blood, and its Queen will be crossing into Creation about a month from now. What we can do about her is not inspiring. Masego?"

The dark-skinned mage smiled thinly.

"Given at least three days of preparation, I can buy us a quarter bell before she breaks through my wards and massacres every single one of us," he said.

"That's reassuring," Thief said cuttingly.

"Not great, I'll admit, but we still have two cards in hand," I said. "First we have the Princess of High Noon, which she *really* needs if she doesn't want to get knifed by Winter after we're all dead. And we have the sun, courtesy of your kleptomania."

Thief looked faintly amused, but did not reply.

"So," I smiled. "We've got the whole night, and wine I really doubt was legally acquired. Let's see if we can think of something to avoid dying horrible, horrible deaths. The floor's open, my friends."

## Chapter 35: Questions

*"To bargain with devils is to paint with your own blood: the greater the work, the harsher the price."*

– Dread Empress Maleficent II

I shivered in discomfort when I crossed the boundary into the prison. It felt wrong in a fundamental way, and if I'd not already gotten enough hints that becoming the Duchess of Moonless Nights had changed my nature in some eldritch way this would have done the trick. There were worrying aspects to that. I'd already made sure that cold iron didn't really hurt me more than any other kind, but Masego was of the opinion that spells crafted to affect entities not of Creation would sting a great deal more than they used to. Given that diabolism as a sorcerous discipline dealt with exactly that, I was going to have to take a few precautions before dealing with Akua. Who was now Diabolist. If she could be sure she could grab a godsdamned Hashmallim before even coming into the Name, she could deal with my bastardized fae title: those two things weren't even close to being in the same league. I shook away the thought. The place where I now stood wasn't another dimension, not exactly. The way Hierophant told it, if he was to keep the Princess of High Noon contained he very much needed for her to be in Creation.

Her power was lesser here, a large part of it surrendered to cross a threshold she did not belong on this side of. If she was in a pocket dimension, however, then all bets were off. Even after being robbed of the sun, Princess Sulia was absurdly powerful and she might just rip her way through the wards with her bare hands if she needed to. So the prison my mages maintained was on Creation, a complicated array that had me reaching for a drink just to look at the plans of. I'd forced Masego to use progressively smaller splurges of magic babble until he found the right metaphor: the whole thing was a drain, more or less. A bunch of escapements had been attached to her that bled out power as quick as she regained it, dispersing it into Creation. The results weren't pretty: the grounds around the prison were alarming to look at, a circle of land that grew, got overripe and died in the span of a dozen heartbeats. And then again, and again, and again.

Ratface had poked his nose in and asked whether the phenomenon could be used to accelerate crops, and gotten the reply that it could. But the crops would be, essentially, plant-shaped dust. And possibly poisonous as well, because why wouldn't the fae make this as horrifying as possible? I'd left the quartermaster plotting with Pickler about possible uses for it, catching something about 'targeting farmland' but also 'spoiling rations'. Should have expected that, really. It was the Praesi way to look at things best left not meddled with and ask 'can we make a weapon out of this?'. *That's how you lot got the Wasteland,*

*Ratface*. They were still a step short of cackling and attempting to steal another country's weather on the villain ladder, but I'd remind Hakram to keep an eye on those two anyway. The last thing I needed was a bunch of Summer-birthed plant monsters running amok in Callow when we finally gave the Courts the boot.

The Princess of High Noon was still hovering in the air, runic shackles on both her wrists and ankles. She was awake now though. Her hair was fire, much like Kilian's when she drew too deep on sorcery, but that was where the resemblance ended. My... Senior Mage looked human, though more delicate in her bones than the average Duni. There was nothing mortal about the looks of Princess Sulia, though: she was power made flesh, a blind sculptor's dream of what people would look like.

"My warden visits," the Princess of High Noon said.

"That'd be Hierophant," I replied easily. "Though I suppose the responsibility ultimately lies with me."

"Have you come merely to equivocate, Duchess?" the fae said. "If so, spare me your presence. Better silence than your ramblings."

"I came to talk," I said. "I happen to have a few questions for you."

"And I will indulge you in this?" the princess mocked.

"Could be I'll have you tortured if you don't," I noted.

The mocking smile did not wane in the slightest.

"I have been under the knives of Winter across many, many lives," she said. "Anything mortals could muster would be childish imitation."

"Speaking as someone who's been on Masego's operating table, you are very much mistaken," I said. "And that was when he was *helping*. But you're right. I won't have you tortured. I don't really condone the practice, as a rule."

"Then the King of Winter has left traces of who you once were inside this misshapen carcass you wear," Princess Sulia said. "Rejoice, Duchess. You are less an abomination than you could be."

"Again with the abomination talk," I said, rolling my eyes. "That's no way to treat someone come to bargain with you, Sulia."

She actually laughed at that. It didn't sound like a person's laugh, more like exhaustion and heat and the clash of steel against steel.

"You have already struck bargains, mortal," she sneered. "Two that my eyes can see. I wonder what you promised Larat, to have him risk my wrath on the field."

That was the Prince of Nightfall's name, I was pretty sure. The Winter King had mentioned it once, but the whole getting my heart ripped out afterwards adventure had ensured it didn't have a place of honour in my memory.

"I'll trade that secret, for questions answered truly," I said.

Her eyes turned to me, and if had not stolen a mantle of power I suspected it would have physically hurt me to meet her gaze. Even as it was, it pricked behind my eyes to match her stare for stare.

"I do not often bargain with your kind," she said.

"I imagine the while incinerating them on sight thing limits your options in that regard," I replied drily.

"There is little of worth to be found amongst mortals," she shrugged, or tried to.

Her bindings didn't allow a lot of room for movement. Normally she wouldn't even be able to speak, but Hierophant had released that binding before I came in.

"Nine questions," I said. "And I will give you the terms of my bargain with the Prince of Nightfall. You are to answer them to my satisfaction, or they will not count."

"You seek to rob me, child," she sneered.

"I already have," I replied with my most unpleasant smile. "Yoink, remember?"

Her face boiled with anger and I cursed myself mentally. I really need to learn to shut my mouth when treating with monsters. If I'd managed to not fucking declare war on the King of Winter halfway through our conversation, in the middle of his very seat of power no less, I'd still have an actual heart instead of whatever he'd shoved into my chest.

"Enjoy that transient victory, Duchess," she said. "Summer comes for you now, and there is no escape."

I sighed.

"You know, I don't actually *want* to fight you people," I said, using 'people' in the loosest sense of the word. "You invaded my home without provocation and started butchering everyone that didn't kneel to a queen from another realm. I'm not Ranger,

Sulia. I don't get into death matches with demigods for the bragging rights."

"You think we want to stride this godforsaken wasteland?" she burst out. "Creation is madness. The disorder is like an itch none of us can scratch, and the people –"

She bit her tongue, glaring at me like I'd forced her to speak up.

"Nine questions," I repeated. "For the terms the Prince of Nightfall gave me."

I paused and hastily continued.

"With the previous stipulations added," I finished.

I still had the pact the King of Winter had forced on me to barter with if that wasn't enough, though I'd rather avoid handing a potential weakness like that hand wrapped to one of my most dangerous enemies. The Princess of High Noon was supposedly terrible at scheming, but the rest of Summer was bound to have some noble that was a fair hand at it. The fae grit her teeth, but after a long silence calmed herself.

"I accept this bargain, as the terms were stated," she said.

Gods, finally. I'd been after answers since the moment the damned Winter Court had popped up in Marchford and so far had gotten only cryptic comments for my troubles. I'd thought about getting my hands on a Winter noble for interrogation more than once, but I wouldn't be able to trust answers from someone too low in the pecking order – and a Count was probably as high as I could aim to grab, even now. The Princess of High Noon was second only to the queen, in the Summer Court, and probably the least tricky operator I could hope for at that hallowed height.

"Why did the Summer Court invade Callow?" I immediately asked.

Eight questions left.

"It was an obligation," Sulia replied. "As Winter was waging war upon Creation, so must we. Her Majesty chose Callow as our enemy, and I know not her reasons."

That explained, to an extent, why the Courts could be both be fighting me when Masego had said they shouldn't be able to attack the same target. If Winter was fighting Praes and Summer was fighting Callow, the difference should be enough to appease whatever arcane rules they obeyed to. It also confirmed that the Summer Queen was up to something: she hadn't been forced to pick Callow, and I doubted she'd made that decision without a reason. That meant there were two fae rulers trying to get something out

of my homeland, and in both cases I had no real notion of *what* that was.

"When the queen lives as a princess, what is her title?" I asked.

Seven questions left. This one came at Hierophant's request. He'd told me he would have a better idea of how to counter the queen if he knew what form her powers usually took.

"Princess of the Morning Star," the fae replied through gritted teeth.

Hadn't liked that one, huh. She clearly knew why I'd asked. I'd wonder about exactly what the implications of the answer were when I had mages with me to make sense of it.

"What forces remained to the Diabolist when you left the field at Liesse?" I asked.

Six questions left. This one she took better than the last. Akua had not made a friend there, looked like. She usually didn't.

"One greater devil," the Princess of High Noon said. "No more than six thousand mortals. Twice this in undead and lesser devils."

Good. This wasn't anything I couldn't deal with, considering the armies I had at my disposal. I'd have to be a raging imbecile to think this was all Diabolist had at her disposal, but it should make up the bulk of her strength on the ground. I mine could beat hers, all that was left was the battle between trump cards. That one would be harder, given how long she'd had to prepare, but I had four other Named on my side. My bag of tricks went a lot deeper than hers, these days, and if that failed I had the right kind of people to smash my way into a victory.

"What is your plan to escape this prison?" I asked.

Five questions left, and she looked furious. Had she really thought I wasn't going to ask that? I'd been dealing with the Ruling Council and the High Lords for over a year. Green I might be, but I wasn't *that* green. She really was terrible at this. *Or simply not used to bargaining from a position of weakness*, I thought. What were the odds she'd been in a story that went like this before? I very much doubted she'd ever played a question game with Winter, if the talk of torture was any indication. There was a very real chance she was flailing because she'd never stood on grounds like these before. *You and me both, Sulia*. I was just better than the fae at keeping my head above the water.

"I am transmuting the flesh of my left arm into power not siphoned by your array," the princess said. "It will allow me to break through the wards eventually."



"Answer's incomplete. When will you be done?" I pressed.

"In a month," she grunted.

It figured. She would probably have broken out in the middle of our tangle with Summer and wrecked our armies from the inside. Hierophant was going to have to take care of this somehow. Now, for Juniper's question.

"There are golden fae in your host," I said. "What are their weaknesses?"

Four questions left. When they'd fought against the legionaries under Nauk, they'd ripped straight through the men until Masego and I had dropped a pair of surprises into their formation to take their pressure off. They seemed to be the equivalent to the Sword of Waning day that Winter fielded, though a great deal more dangerous. Unlike the deadwood soldiers they fought in a real formation.

"The Immortals are bound to the Queen of Summer," she said. "Should she die they will perish as well."

Hardly a weakness, that. There had to be more to it.

"And?" I prompted.

"They weaken away from Summer," she grudgingly added. "They carry banners with shards of the sun, but should these be destroyed they will lose much of their power."

And now my mages had a target. Progress. I'd covered everything I'd been asked to find out by others so far, which left me four questions to try to ferret out what I personally wanted to know that didn't qualify as an 'immediate concern'. By the standards of my officers, anyway. I was of the opinion that the answers that would win us this war weren't numbers or weaknesses.

"What does the Summer Court mean to do with Callow, if they take it?" I asked.

Three questions.

"The taken territories are to be made part of Arcadia and Summer itself," the princess said. "Along with all those who live in them."

I closed my eyes, mind spinning. The Winter Court had tried to do something similar, I was pretty sure. During the attack that I'd gone into Arcadia to end, the fae had brought a shard of Arcadia into Creation. That had failed, but the Winter King had taken me as a vassal afterwards, binding Marchford to him through me. If Summer was after the same ends, then that lay at the heart of the plays on both their parts. If Summer grew larger, then the

balance between it and Winter swung in their direction. It might even introduce fresh stories to the Court's advantage, and would explain why the Summer fae had been forcing Callowans to swear fealty to the Queen of Summer in my reports. I was still missing something, though. If grabbing land had been the objective, why had Winter struck one of the most fortified targets in Callow? The Fifteenth had been at Marchford for months before they began their attacks. Sure it would have been easier to cross there, but Summer had proved it wasn't impossible to do so in other places. If Winter had opened a gate into, say, Vale? They might have grabbed the entire central plains of Callow before the Legions could react. Sulia had already stated that Winter had been the ones to begin this dance, which brought forward even more questions. He hadn't been the one reacting, meaning it had been a deliberate choice.

"Why did the King of Winter target Marchford, specifically?" I asked.

Two questions.

"I cannot know for certain," the princess said.

"Your best guesses," I grunted.

"The boundaries were thinner there, making an invasion possible," the fae replied. "Or he needed a Named in his service to act in Creation without crossing himself."

Shit, hadn't given her an actual number of guesses. Just plural, so she got away with two. It wasn't worth using another question to ask for what would be more speculation on her part. I might have misread the situation, I frowned. When Summer had crossed, they'd had the weight of symmetry on their side: Winter was at war on Creation, so they must be as well. That might have made it easier for them to leave Arcadia, and they'd certainly been better at it. They'd spread a lot quicker and in several places compared to Winter's one failed beachhead. Since the Winter Court had been the ones to begin the pattern, and an unprecedented one at that, they might not have had another choice than to go for the lowest-hanging fruit that was Marchford.

Then again, if I put myself in the King's boots, what better target than Callow was there? On Calernia, at least. There was no other territory so divided and recently weakened by war. If he'd pulled this shit in the Principate, he would have been in a great deal of trouble. The Free Cities, maybe, but there were far more players there and a larger amount of Named. All he'd have to deal with here was a Squire with her crew and the Diabolist down south. My people were untested, many recently come to their Names and Akua had 'going to rebel real soon' good as stamped onto her forehead. It occurred to me, at that moment, that I might be the cause of all this. That I might have ensured the Winter Court

would invade my homeland and force Summer to do the same by allowing the Liesse Rebellion to happen in the first place. I'd put blood in the water and the monsters had tasted it, taken it as invitation to come out and play.

"Merciless Gods," I whispered.

Thousands had died, in the rebellion, but how many more to the fae? All of southern Callow had been occupied. My own legion had come under assault. Hells, I'd created the perfect conditions for the Diabolist to try her crowning scheme and there was no avoiding the truth that putting that madness would be bloody work. I'd let a hero go, once, and spoken words to him. Years later and Callow was still paying the price of that decision one corpse at a time. I took hold of myself. I could not afford to show weakness in front of a Princess of Summer, even one my prisoner. I met her eyes and saw she had missed nothing. She did not delight in my horror, but neither did she shy away from it. *I need to know*, I thought. To get at the bottom of this, before it was too late. This was larger than fae plying their usual tricks. Both Courts were playing for larger stakes than I'd thought.

"If either Court keeps part of Callow," I asked hoarsely. "What happens in Arcadia?"

One question left. The Princess of High Noon smiled, slowly and broadly.

"I do not know," she laughed. "Nothing, my queen says, for it will pass. Everything, your king says, for that clay has never been shaped."

I felt like I'd been handed the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle, the one that made the shape of the whole clear. The Winter King didn't actually care all that much if I could force out Summer. He'd prefer it, because then any advantages that would come into being would be entirely on his side. But even if I failed, as long as I lived he still had Marchford and a Named he could influence. He would have an even deeper connection to my city than Summer would manage with their stolen territories, if he kept my heart. It dawned upon me that, as far as he was concerned, he had already won. It was just the degree of victory that remained to be determined. The Prince of Nightfall had compared the fae of Winter to foxes chewing through their own keg to escape a trap, back in Skade. Willing to destroy something part of them to escape a greater doom. And I'd seen, when I'd become the Duchess of Moonless Nights, the unending circle that was the lives and deaths of the Courts. The outcomes were always fixed from the start, but that was because in that circle there were only *known quantities*.

If I became part of that, if Callow did? In Arcadia, the Summer Queen had said the 'story would correct itself'. She thought this

attempt would fail and everything would return to the way it used to be when the wheel turned again. She was just playing out her role as assigned to her, Summer Ascendant destroying everything in its path. But the King of Winter thought he could escape the wheel, and was gambling with the lives of everyone in Callow for his roll of the dice. It didn't matter so much that he beat Summer so long as an outcome without precedent lay at the end of the road. Even if he lost, he could be born to a different story when the wheel turned. If the wheel turned, which would no longer be a given. I'd been looking for a master plan in the Praesi tradition this whole time, but there'd never been one. It was just a desperate man throwing stones in a pond so the same old reflection would stop staring back at him. If a single thread of fae influence remained in Callow by the time this was over, it might be enough to drag then entire country into the mess. I had just become the greatest living liability to peace in my homeland.

I had to break them both, the royals on each side. Destroy everything that they were. The consequences otherwise were beyond what I could easily understand. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. The Summer Queen. She would be the lynchpin of this, as the only one of the two I could reach.

"Sulia," I said. "What is the role at the heart of the Queen of Summer?"

My last question. My most important.

"Threefold are the duties of the Laurel Crown," she said. "To destroy Winter. To protect Aine. To see the Sun victorious."

Three, always three. And I would need them all in my palm, if I was to bend a god to my will.

"Now complete your end of the bargain, abomination," she hissed. "You've had your fill of me."

"I will take the crown of seven mortals rulers and one, to lay them at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall," I said.

Her face went still. A glimmer of something like fear passed through those shining eyes, and shit that wasn't good at all.

"You know not what you have promised," she said. "*This must not come to pass.*"

"Then tell me why," I said.

Silence, silence and hatred.

"I thought as much," I murmured. "Sweet dreams, Princess of High Noon."

I left. I didn't look for my friends, though I felt the urge. Right now I felt too disgusted with myself, with them, with everything I had wrought since I first became the Squire. I loved them, and I should. I'd paid an ugly price for them. How many lives I claimed I wanted to save had I traded away to have them at my side? I sought someone else instead, someone who would not pick at the loathing. I needed advice, and I had the puppet of one of the greatest living rulers in Calernia within my reach. I found the woman waiting in my tent and sat down in front of the body Malicia was looking through from far, far away.

"You said you would teach me, once," I told the Empress. "So teach me now. I need to outwit a god in the flesh, before a moon has passed."

Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, Tyrant of Dominions High and Low, Holder of the Nine Gates and Sovereign of All She Beheld, watched me for a long moment.

Then she smiled.

## Chapter 36: Malice

*"It is impossible for the Empire to make an appreciable gain so long as this gain is a loss to every other nation on Calernia. To remedy this, we must discard the traditional lines of allying only to Evil polities and make it so that it is in the interest of other powers for us to rise."*

– Extract from 'The Death of the Age of Wonders', a treatise by Dread Empress Malicia

"When beginning a scheme, one must first consider the desired outcome," the Empress said. "All other practicalities are derived from this, and determining whether that outcome is feasible at all is the most important part of the process."

I'd lit candles, tired of the gloom inside my tent even if I could see through it. Malicia had taken one of my folding chairs and somehow managed to make it feel like a throne just by the way she held herself – through another woman's body, no less – while I'd dropped into the seat forcefully borrowed from the Count of Old Oak. 'Looted' was such an ugly word. I'd used one of the candles to light up my pipe and propped up my feet against a low stool. Black had never insisted on a formal setting for his lectures and the Empress seemed inclined to continue along the same lines. I'd lain off the wine for the night, deciding the wakeleaf would be indulgence enough. At this rate I was going to run out of satchels of the stuff, though now that Ratface had the Smugglers under him getting my hands on more shouldn't be too troublesome. Still costly, though. Letting out a stream of smoke to the side, I drummed fingers against the ornate chair arm. I knew what I wanted, I was just pondering the right phrasing.

"I want the fae out of Callow and their influence removed," I said.

Malicia smiled. It wasn't breath-taking, not the way I knew she was in person, but just looking at it made me feel at ease. Comfortable. Like I was sitting across from an old friend and not one of the most dangerous women alive. It was the smile of someone who had studied the image that best brought out those feelings and crafted a flawless replica to wear. The Empress was made up of smoke and mirrors in arrangements that had been refined for decades, an illusion masterful enough that it remained effective even while I knew what she was doing. She was everything Akua Sahelian wanted to be, and wasn't that a terrifying thought?

"You are using an absolute, Catherine," she chided. "Avoid these, for they leave no room for compromise. You should be aware, by now, that there is no such thing as an absolute victory. The Empire conquered Callow through overwhelming military victory, but did this remove the realities of its occupation? Compromise, much as you dislike it, is a necessity. Without something to offer as boon, your enemy has nothing to lose. This ensures from the beginning that your opposition will be entrenched."

"The Imperial governorships don't feel like a compromise, from where I stand," I pointed out.

"Because they were not a compromise with Callow, whose perspective you still espouse in large part," Malicia replied. "They were the boon granted to the High Lords after they were denied the direct subjection they believed their due."

I grimaced. Praesi aristocrats ruling over Callowan cities would have been... bad. The way the histories said the Proceran occupation had been, and probably even worse. When Callow had been divided into a handful of principalities under royals that displaced the old aristocracy, the entire kingdom had been in state of constant simmering rebellion. The knightly orders turned bandit against the foreigners, Principate dignitaries were knifed in dark alleys by everyone from thieves to merchants and fields went untilled as farmers disappeared into the countryside rather than toil for the invader. It hadn't been great battles that saw the Principate withdraw but the constant grind of attrition on every facet of the occupation.

"That would have been disastrous," I said.

"Very much so," Malicia agreed. "That is not to say the governorships were not designed to quell unrest, of course. It is not happenstance that Imperial governors were only granted four year mandates, or that Amadeus was given authority to oversee them."

I drew on my pipe, looking for the meaning in that. Four year mandates. From where I stood, what did they mean? The sweet smoke hung in the air before my eyes for a while, until I dug far enough back in my childhood I could get a handle on what she'd meant.

"Mazus was hated," I said. "But every four years, there was hope he wouldn't be given another mandate. That his abuses would come to the attention of the Tower and that he'd be recalled."

"Impermanence," the Empress said. "That was the key. The belief that the enemy could be removed, if they were patient. And who did you look to for salvation, in this matter?"

"The Tower," I said. "Black."

I kept my breathing steady, but my blood ran cold. Every time I thought I understood the breadth of the plans they'd made to keep Callow part of the Empire, I found another hidden knife. It was deceptively simple, wasn't it? If the heroes that popped up failed and failed visibly, then relief had to come from another source and the only one available was the Tower. Imperial governors had been allowed relatively minor abuses that filled their pockets and kept their families happy in the Wasteland, while my people were taught to look for deliverance in Ater one mandate at a time.

"To conclude this matter," Malicia said, "that is why your abolishment of this system is not offensive to me. I no longer need to appease the High Lords, for as an internal threat they are ended for the foreseeable future. The remaining objective is to stabilize Callow as part of the Empire, and you represent a valid alternative in this."

I dimly realized, in that moment, that this exchange had not occurred naturally. She had, even before first mentioning the occupation, known how I would react to that mention. The Empress had then used what I'd say to lead into what was both a lesson about what I'd come to her for help and a gentle reminder of the political currents I'd have to deal with when getting Callow back on its feet after all this. Gods. It was such a little thing, but such a telling one. That a woman I'd barely spoken to a handful of times could predict me this easily and fold that into a broader intent without missing a step. I cleared my throat.

"No absolutes," I conceded. "I want the fae physically gone from Callow and any harmful influence removed."

"Good," Malicia smiled, and for a fleeting moment I was reminded of sunny days on the docks and the first girl I'd ever kissed.

There'd been seemingly genuine joy on her face and for a heartbeat I'd believed it. She wasn't using sorcery, I knew that.

There was no artefact or Speaking at work. She could spin me around with just words and body language. I wondered if it was more effective because I was Named – I'd not been able to study people so closely or accurately, before becoming the Squire. I'd become more sensitive to details, and that sensitivity would feed straight into her game: I'd grown used to listening to my instincts, and my instincts told me what I saw was true. Gods, if that was true then she'd managed to turn one of the basic advantages every Named took for granted into an edge for her alone without exerting so much as a speck of power. I reached for the bundle of Winter inside me, let the freezing cold flow through my veins. I was careful not to let the bleed affect the temperature, since it would be as good as sending up a written notice of what I was doing. The icy sensation spreading through me brought some much-needed clarity with it. I pulled at my pipe to hide the vapour that would have come out of my mouth amidst the wakeleaf smoke.

"Then let us speak of the entities that would stand in your way, should you seek to achieve this," the Empress said.

"The Winter Court," I said. "The Summer Court. Possibly the Diabolist, if she goes full opportunist."

"These are entities that will actively oppose you," she said. "Extend your perspective, my dear, to those who do not want you to fail but may withhold assistance for their own interests."

I frowned.

"The Dark Guilds," I said. "Some of the upper echelons of the Legions of Terror. I'd say the High Lords, but you seem to have them in hand."

"Those of them that would invest in seeing you defeated have already done so through the Diabolist," Malicia said. "You may consider the aristocracy of the Wasteland as no longer in play. Let us begin with the lesser liabilities. How can you clear them away?"

"I have no leverage on the Guild of Assassins," I admitted. "Haven't found a real way to affect them aside from threats. The Smugglers have been scared into cooperation. And for the Legions, doing anything there is like throwing a stone in a glass house. They answer to you and Black alone, so meddling never struck me as being in the cards."

"That is because you still think of yourself as a separate entity from the Empire," the Empress gently said. "Discard this perception, Catherine. A few scrying sessions making it clear that you speak with my authority end the issue entirely. If I am to rely on you, as you wish me to, learn to rely on me as well."



I balked, more out of habit than any reason I could express in words. I fiddled with the shaft of dragonbone and forced myself to seriously consider what the Empress had said. Had I ever really considered myself as part of Praes? I already knew the answer to that, deep down. I'd taken my first steps onto this path with the notion that I would join the Legions to gain authority and then use this authority to change things in Callow. The heart of it had always been that I'd be part of the Praesi hierarchy without ever *belonging* in it. I'd stuck to that, even as the situation changed month by month. I'd relied on Black, sure, but only to teach me and shield me from other Wastelanders. Even when I'd forged the Ruling Council, the motives for its structure had all revolved around limiting Praesi influence in my homeland. There was a reason it had stung back in Laure, when Thief had called me a collaborator. I still saw the Empire as the enemy and for years I'd been dancing from one flourish of rhetoric to another to avoid owning up to that, because almost everyone I loved came from it. Saying I didn't oppose Praes, just the parts of it I found unacceptable. That I was willing to live with what it could be, if not what it was right now.

But I was running out of excuses to not make use of the parts of the Empire that I'd already said I believed in. I wasn't above throwing around my weight as the Squire to get my way, because I'd always thought of the Name as *mine*. But it wasn't, not really. Praes at large listened to the Squire because she was the apprentice to the Black Knight, the leading villain of the next generation of Calamities. The moment I'd taken Black's hand I'd chosen a side for everyone to see, and lying to myself about it wouldn't get me anywhere. I couldn't have the authority coming from being part of the Tower's rule without actually *being part of the Tower's rule*. It wasn't a nice thought. It was bitter, and it felt like I was spitting on everything I'd ever dreamed of as a girl. But it would work. And if I kept mouthing off to heroes about how their pride and principles just got in the way of getting the shit that mattered done, then I had better be ready to follow through. Otherwise I should not have lived this long.

"Then please do so, Your Majesty," I said, taking a deep breath. "Can I assume you have leverage on the Dark Guilds?"

"Malicia," the Empress reminded me. "Call me Malicia, darling. And I have a few irons in the fire. Scribe was the one to call them to heel after the Conquest but I've people in their ranks. Enough that a message can be sent."

I breathed out. There were only smouldering remnants in my pipe, so I took a last pull from it and set it aside. The smoke drifted lazily in the candlelight, a wall that would do nothing at all to protect me from the woman in front of me.

"That leaves the worst three," I said.

The Empress shifted slightly in her seat and I side-eyed her. There was something... In some intangible way, I felt like I could trust her more now. Also like I should take my feet off the stool and straighten up. The Winter cold wavered when I realized exactly what she'd done. *She's mimicking Black's body language*, I thought, horrifyingly impressed. If they were closer in height I might never have noticed. There was an amused glint in the puppet's eyes when I stared at her face. She knew perfectly well that I'd noticed.

"We arrive at the interesting part," the Empress said. "Before touching upon how these entities can be affected by us, consider their nature as agents and how this informs their actions."

My brow creased.

"I'm not sure I follow," I said.

"As an example, let us study Cordelia Hasenbach," Malicia said.

I leaned forward interestedly. It wasn't everyday I got to have an assessment of the ruler of the Principate from the mouth of the very same woman who'd been fighting her across the continent for the better part of a decade.

"At first glance, dearest Cordelia is the most powerful individual on the surface of Calernia," the other woman said. "She commands the largest and wealthiest nation on the continent, her armies are recently blooded and her personal diplomatic reputation is pristine."

"Procer's isn't," I immediately said. "The reputation, I mean. No one that has a border with the Principate remembers them fondly."

"Indeed," Malicia smiled. "The history of the nation she rules does influence what actions she can and cannot take. At a more basic level, consider the limits of her position. Cordelia Hasenbach is Lycaonese, the Prince of Rhenia. Her support base is primarily Lycaonese as well, which means it is poorer and less populous than that of her internal opposition. She can only project military strength temporarily, for the Lycaonese armies are needed at the northern borders. What does this mean for her position in Procer?"

"She has rich, powerful rivals," I said. "And she needs to keep them in check if she wants to keep her throne."

"Precisely," she smiled. "To compound the issue, the civil war that Amadeus initiated and I fed has ravaged large swaths of the Principate, leaving her with large amounts of dispossessed and unemployed soldiery. She is unlikely to face open rebellion, as it would be reputational suicide for any ambitious rival to try to remove her by force after the last decade of war. Yet if she

does not deal with this issue, she risks being set aside in favour of a ruler that will."

"So she needs to keep her soldiers busy and out of her lands while she rebuilds the Principate," I frowned. "Then why Praes? Why Callow? There's easier targets. Sure her reputation will take a hit if she scraps with Levant or the Free Cities instead, but it's kind of *expected* of Procer they're going to be real pricks to their neighbours."

"We now return to your earlier insight about reputation. If Cordelia acted as you said, she would face the same issue that the Empire traditionally does," Malicia said. "She would stand alone. Make no mistake, Catherine, Procer has been greatly weakened. It cannot afford war on more than one front, which is certain to erupt if the Principate turns expansionist again. The Calernian balance of power would be shattered if she was allowed to make gains."

I chewed on that. Hasenbach needed a war, but she also needed her other borders quiet. Which meant a target that didn't worry everybody else, and the way she could accomplish that was...

"A Crusade," I sighed. "It *has* to be a Crusade, from her perspective. She can't not be at war and she can't take on any of the southern nations without pissing off the others. But if she's fighting Praes, not only can they not backstab her they might actually have to help."

"And so we come upon the nature of Cordelia Hasenbach as an entity," the Empress said. "She must be at war, but cannot be at war with a nation that is Good. These are the rules she has to obey."

"It's why she can meddle in the Free Cities but only to back the faction fighting Helike," I said. "Otherwise her southern borders catch fire. She has to fight against Evil or her alliances all collapse because no one can trust Procer."

"Have you wondered why I never expressed fears of you attempting an independent Callow, Catherine?" Malicia smiled. "This is the reason. Assuming you achieved that result and even sought to remove the impetus for Imperial invasions by trading us grain, you would still have to face Procer. You are, after all, a villain. An acceptable recipient of dear Cordelia's wrath from a diplomatic perspective, and from a political one a long-term threat. Procer cannot afford another hostile border, from a purely logistical standpoint. It needs Callow to be Good and at war with Praes, to keep them both in check."

That made it twice that she'd turned an offhand example into a pointed lesson as to where I had to stand. As I understood it this was unusually straightforward for her, but I wasn't

surprised. She would be tailoring her approach to who she was approaching, and I wasn't unaware I reacted best to people being direct. The part she'd left unspoken was that if Callow with me at the head was at war with the Principate, it would be without the Legions backing me. That wasn't ending well for my side, and since Praes wouldn't be able to tolerate a Proceran protectorate just across the river that meant Callow would once more become the battlefield of the continent when the Tower made its move.

"Point taken," I said. "Nature, huh. The Summer Court is the easiest to figure out. The Queen has three rules that bind her, I've been told: destroy Winter, protect Aine and 'see the Sun victorious'."

"All points of pressure you can feasibly reach," Malicia said.

"I've got the sun stashed away, so I can bargain with that," I said. "Threaten to destroy it, maybe? I get the impression to actually do that in Creation would be a very bad idea, but it wouldn't be the first time I lied to a god. The other two are a little trickier."

"As I understand it, my dear, Winter is not a static state," the Empress said. "It is transient, fated to come and pass. You do not need to think of destruction as requiring force. If what Winter is no longer corresponds to what Summer believes it should be, that may very well qualify as 'destruction'."

"You mean force it to pass into Spring or Autumn," I said, taking a look at the notion. "I'm fairly certain the seasons only shift when either Summer or Winter has lost the war. I'm not sure that's feasible."

Malicia smiled warmly.

"It would be a mistake, to believe yourself bound to the traditional fae outcomes," she said. "This entire affair began by one of the Courts believing these were not impossible to avert."

*A way to make Winter no longer Winter.* There might be something to that.

"That leaves Aine, the seat of Summer," I said. "I can make gates so getting there isn't impossible, just... really stupid. There's no winning a fight there, and the fae can cross back into Arcadia much easier than they come into Creation. It won't be undefended."

I paused.

"I'll need all three, if I'm to force the Queen's hand about anything," I said. "She's not really a thing that gets

compromise. Anything less than complete failure, anathema to what she is, and she'll just keep on slugging."

"If your strength is insufficient, borrow strength," Malicia said. "She has enemies as well, does she not? If I understand your plan correctly, this assumption lay at the heart of your taking prisoner the Princess of High Noon. Should Summer fail to secure her return, should they lose too many soldiers, they will afterwards fall in the face of oncoming Winter. This is one of the limitations she must abide."

I spared a moment to hope my intentions weren't this fucking transparent to everyone out there. I would have spared another to be intimidated by the fact she'd understood my plan without being involved at any point in the making of it, but I'd grown dull to that breed of surprise by now.

"Winter winning fucks it all up too," I said frankly. "I'm not sure if *worse* is the right term, but it will definitely be a similar yet different shade of godawful."

"Let us speak of Winter, then," the Empress lightly said. "You have treated with the King of Winter in person. Become bound to his Court, in part, and fought at the side of his greatest captains. What did you glimpse from this?"

"Take two vicious, spitting furious cats and shove them in a bag," I said. "Then add that it has been there since time literally immemorial. The King's the cat *real* desperate about getting out of that bag."

"A colourful description," Malicia said, arching an eyebrow. "Yet short on useful specifics."

I almost laughed, until I remembered how fucking dangerous it would be to actually like this woman.

"He doesn't have a plan, I think," I said. "Or his plan was just to drag Callow into this mess and he doesn't really need to control what comes after that. He wants out, Malicia. I don't think *how* he gets out actually matters all that much. And that he thinks that way at all is scaring the other fae. I don't think he's supposed to."

"That," the Empress said quietly, "is worrying. Wekesa once told me that Arcadia is akin to a first draft of Creation, and mirrors it still. If Winter is meant to be the reflection of villainy, and yet bound to it, there are... implications."

I didn't have to look all that far to find the villains who'd made the largest mark on Calernia in the last century, so her meaning was pretty clear.

"It's not that clear cut," I said. "The parallels aren't so direct. But it's crossed my mind, yeah."

"A matter to consult more sorcerously-inclined minds over," Malicia finally said. "Desperation is a useful tool, Catherine, especially if it can be given outlet. If your read of the creature is correct, it is the easiest of your obstacles to bargain with."

I grimaced.

"He has my heart," I said bluntly. "And I don't mean that in a romantic sense. Ripped it out to make a point which, uh, complicates negotiations a bit."

The Empress smiled, almost fondly.

"I sometimes forget how much Amadeus has left his touch on you," she said. "Catherine, one cannot always deal from a position of strength. That is mere vanity. And doing so does not mean the negotiations will be at your expense."

"Fae always screw you on deals," I reminded her.

I'd always thought that Black's quirk of lips was terrifying, the blade-smile that always heralded something dark happening to someone he thought deserved it. Looking at the Empress' face then, the languid and almost lazy amusement, I found something to match it. This had been the closest to a glimpse of the person underneath the crown I'd gotten since I'd first met her, and what I saw there had my fingers itching for a blade.

"Darling, you forget what side you chose," she drawled. "You stand with the Dread Empire of Praes, Catherine. We have murdered gods and made doorkeepers of demons. We have tricked angels into damnation and made orderly host of the hordes of Hell. Fae?"

She smiled amusedly.

"Fae will be a pleasant reprieve from the High Lords, my dear. Let me show you."

*Fuck, I thought. Now I like her.*

## **Chapter 37: Procedures**

*"Truth and silence lie better than the silvermost tongue."*  
– Soninke saying

It was a little odd to be half-naked in front of three people, but the only person that was feeling awkward about it was Hakram. The moment I'd begun unbuttoning my shirt he'd cleared his throat and looked away, and had been staring at the ceiling of my tent

for a solid half hour by now. Considering I had it on good authority – Robber, ever up for a bit of gossip if it was at someone else's expense – that he was still sleeping around on the regular his prudery for this was pretty amusing. As for the other two, well, Masego couldn't have been any less interested in tits if he tried and this wasn't anything Kilian hadn't seen before. I shifted on the stool at the memory of some of the instances where she'd done a great deal more than just looking and Hierophant clucked his tongue disapprovingly.

"Don't move," he said. "This is delicate work."

I'd have to take his word on that, since I couldn't actually see what he was doing. He was prodding around the area of my heart with a long oaken wand covered in runes that was entirely ignoring my flesh, pausing now and then to look at the collection of hovering runes in the air by his side. Kilian was crouched at his side, forming a ball of light over her upturned palm. They'd said it was because they needed a 'point of comparison', though they'd been vague about what exactly that meant.

"It's not grounded in the heart," the Senior Mage frowned.

"Agreed," Masego said, and I felt him poke something inside me.

Runes shifted in the air and the redhead inhaled sharply.

"That should kill a human outright," she said. "It's enough sorcery to turn all the liquids in her body to ice."

"Named, Kilian," the blind Soninke reminded her. "And this 'moon' seems to have been purposed to regulate the energies."

I cleared my throat.

"So you have answers for me, then," I said.

"We can confidently say that your third aspect is bound to your title of Duchess of Moonless Nights and not the heart replacement the king forced upon you," Hierophant said. "A fascinating piece of work, that."

"So when I get my heart back," I prompted.

"You should keep the aspect, assuming you remain the Duchess," Kilian said. "Though it will severely limit your abilities."

I met her eyes, but she turned to look at the runes.

"The moon the King of Winter placed inside you serves two purposes," Hierophant elaborated. "The first it to mimic the role in your body your heart would. Fascinating, as I said. I did not believe the fae had so keen an understanding of human anatomy."

"And the second?" I said.

"You might consider it a heart in the magical sense," Masego said. "All the Winter power that you can bring to bear is siphoned into it, then released for your use natured in a way that lessens the damage to your body."

"That feels like something that's going to fuck me over when I get my actual heart back," I said.

"Without that filter I'm not certain you will be able to use your third aspect," Kilian said. "I've never seen the direct aftermath, but I was given to understand it is a domain?"

"And I definitely know what that is," I lied. "Pretty sure Hakram doesn't, though, so to be polite someone should explain."

"Actually," the orc began, but I shushed him.

"It's all right, Hakram," I said. "We're your friends. You don't need to pretend with us."

"I explained to you what that is mere months ago," Masego said, sounding surprised as he eyed the orc. "Perhaps you should drink less. It's beginning to affect your memory."

Adjutant glared at me helplessly and I grinned.

"I'll keep an eye on him, I promise," I told Hierophant.

The dark-skinned mage nodded, then looked up at me through his eye cloth.

"Creation is, in essence, matter with a set of rules imposed by the Gods upon it," he said. "A domain is when an entity, in this case you, temporarily overlays different matter and rules over it."

Well, that sounded mildly blasphemous. And incredibly dangerous.

"In your case, 'Fall' appears to create a bubble of empty darkness where you may use Winter energies to lower the temperature beneath what should physically be possible," Masego continued. "Unusually offensive in nature. Most domains provide different territory and a comparative advantage to the entity that creates it."

"It shouldn't be possible for a Squire to have a domain at all," Kilian said frankly. "Transitory Names are not strong enough. Domains usually belong to lesser gods, full-fledged Named late in their career or particularly ancient monsters."



"It's a rare ability even among heroes," Masego noted. "Aside from the Champion lines in Levant and allegedly the Saint of Swords, there shouldn't be any other living human practitioner."

"Then how did I get one?" I asked. "I didn't exactly rub a lamp and make a wish to get this, Hierophant."

"Djinn were usually bound to urns, not lamps, and did not grant wishes," Masego replied absent-mindedly. "It does occur naturally in some entities. Every dragon has a domain at their heart of their body, it's what allows them to breathe fire. And Father has theorized elves essentially become a living domain when they get old enough."

"You have a pretty good look at my body right now," I said, raising an eyebrow. "See any scales or pointy ears?"

"No," Hierophant told me seriously. "And I would be able to see them even if they were invisible."

I saw Kilian's lips twitch from the corner of my eye.

"Now," Masego muttered, "this is not conclusive by any means but I do have a theory."

"All my ears are listening," I said.

He stared suspiciously at me but I gave him my most innocent smile. His frown deepened, so maybe I needed to put some work into that.

"I believe this to be a leash," Hierophant said. "You are given powerful abilities, but to make use of them properly you must give the King of Winter foothold in your soul. Removing that foothold turns what was once an asset into a liability, giving you strong incentive to remain bound to him."

"There's more to it than that," Kilian said quietly, and Masego seemed surprised.

The Senior Mage flicked her fingers and three rows of runes parted from the rest.

"I've never had occasion to do a full mapping ritual on my father," the redhead said, "but this corresponds more or less to how his body reacted to fae sorcery as a halfblood. Higher tolerance, but there's no actual attempt made to make it *harmless*. In someone born, that's only natural. But in an artificial construct?"

"Power limiter," Hierophant said, glass eyes gleaming under dark cloth.

"Your saying he screwed me," I said.

I paused.

"More than previously believed," I added.

Kilian nodded slowly.

"When you draw deep on the power, you must get backlash," she said.

"My blood starts to freeze," I admitted.

"You were crippled," Hierophant said bluntly. "You have the power of a Duchess to draw on, but if you actually did so it would kill you. It explains why you were at such a disadvantage fighting that Summer duchess in Arcadia, when in theory you should have been on even footing."

"Countess at most," Kilian said. "Your domain allows you to fight out of your league but the King made certain you would never be powerful enough to be a threat to him."

I clenched my fingers. This shouldn't have come as a surprise, even if it did. I'd been so focused on how the threat was my stolen heart that I'd never thought to question the additions to my power I'd discovered. Archer had told me that the Duke of Violent Squalls was supposed to be one of the big names in the Winter Court. Someone who was supposed to turn the story back to war if the fae that ruled Winter was trying to avoid it. There was power to that kind of role, and by taking his title even in a different form I should have swung a great deal harder than the average duke or duchess. I'd thought it was because I wasn't really fae, but evidently there was more to it than that.

"Can you fix this?" I finally asked.

Masego smiled.

"If I were still the Apprentice, no," he said. "But such miracles are now within my purview. I will need preparations and the process will not be gentle, but it can be done."

"You'll still get backlash," Kilian warned. "You're a mortal bearing a fae title, that much is unavoidable."

"The proportion of power than can be drawn before backlash could be increased tenfold, at the very least," Hierophant said. "A Duchess in full. You've an unusually tough constitution, you should be able to weather it."

"Ominous," I said. "Get this ready. The sooner we get it done the better."

"It could be ready tomorrow, but three days hence would be easier," Masego said. "For ritual purposes, the new moon will benefit me."

The mage got back to his feet, adjusting the black robes over his corpulent frame. Kilian followed suit, brushing back red hair in a gesture I followed with my eyes out of habit. Masego left the tent without bothering to excuse myself, entirely forgetting Hakram was still in here. The redhaired mage lingered for a moment.

"Catherine," she said.

I hesitated.

"Dismissed, Senior Mage," I replied.

Her face shuttered and she gave a stiff salute before leaving. I began to button up my shirt again, fingers almost shaking. That had taken more determination than I'd expected.

"You decent?" Adjutant asked.

"Never," I drawled. "Villain, remember?"

"No one's a villain every hour of the day," Hakram grunted. "And if you're being lippy about it, that's a yes."

I struck a suggestive pose when he turned, my top two buttons still undone, and he groaned.

"Just too much woman for you, I understand," I said sympathetically.

"You're barely half an orc," he gravelled.

"I'm vicequeen of Callow, you savage," I grinned. "That could be construed as treason."

"If you have me arrested, who will handle the paperwork?" he said.

"You have always been my most loyal," I hastily replied. "Never doubted you a moment."

The orc snorted and reached for the carafe of wine Masego had refused to let me touch. He poured two glasses and pressed one into my hand. Oh dear. That was the herald to a serious conversation, wasn't it? The joke about his drinking habits died unspoken on my tongue.

"We haven't talked about it," he said.

"The heart?" I said. "It hasn't been a priority so far, to be honest. It was functional and there's other fires to put out first."

"Cat," he said flatly. "You know that doesn't work on me."

My lips thinned. No matter how well it served me, there were times I wished he was just a little less perceptive.

"There is nothing to say," I grunted.

"It's a nasty habit you have," Hakram said. "Thinking admitting something hurt you means you're weak."

"Already got that speech from Masego last year," I sighed. "I cope. We're in the middle of a godsdamned war, in case you hadn't noticed. This is so far down the ladder of shit I need to deal with it's not even worth mentioning."

Hakram drank from his cup and I did the same.

"You were happier, with her," he said. "Everyone saw that."

"Happy doesn't come into this," I barked. "I didn't sign up for *happy ever after*. The colour of my cloak's a bit of hint there."

"Bullshit," Hakram said, and it was vehement enough I flinched. "That's an excuse and you know it. Fix this or don't, but do not pretend that being a villain means you have to be miserable. You know that's untrue."

"What the fuck do you want me to say, Hakram?" I hissed. "That I miss her? It's not exactly fucking riddle when I feel like I put a fresh knife in my ribs every time she's in the room."

"That is a start," the tall orc gravely said.

"She wants to cross a line," I said tiredly. "I can't stop her without doing the same. Talking's not going to change any of it, so this is just salting the wound."

"I understand she wants to do a ritual," Hakram said cautiously.

"She wants to slaughter people like animals," I spat. "To get rid of whatever it is that screws her up when she draws too deep on magic."

"Human sacrifice," he said. "How many?"

"I didn't ask," I said. "It doesn't matter. One would be too much."

I eyed him, saw the lack of expression on his face.

"Gonna take her side, are you?" I bitterly said. "Say I've done worse. That it makes me a hypocrite to find even the idea repulsive."

"You assume much," Hakram said. "Do you think Callowans fed most the altars in Praes? Wars with the Kingdom came once a reign, Catherine. In peace they looked for fodder in the Steppes."

That have me pause, because he was right. I had assumed, deep down, that no one born on his side of the Wasaliti would really get where I was coming from. One of the reasons I'd never talked about this with anybody. It had been extremely presumptuous of me.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I didn't mean-"

"I know," he sighed, fangs flashing. "I will not pretend my people are anything but red-handed, Catherine. We have fed upon mankind since the First Dawn. We kept slaves and sacked cities, splattered blood across the writ of Creation. But this, we understand. The Miezans taught the Wasteland to hate chains, and in turn the Wasteland taught us to hate the altars. When Lord Black decreed the Legions would no longer bleed their own for victory, he earned deeper loyalty than he understood."

I looked away, because I knew that Black hadn't done that because he thought it was right or just. He'd thought it necessary, that those rituals were a crutch that did more harm than good. He probably knew that already. Most of the orc generals likely did as well, but to greenskins action always mattered more than intent.

"I've killed people," I said. "A lot of them. Because they were my enemies, because they were in my way. Sometimes even to make a point. Guilt, what was actually *deserved*, I stopped bringing into it somewhere along the way."

Hakram drank and did not speak.

"I started the Liesse Rebellion," I admitted suddenly. "I let the Lone Swordsman go after starting him down that path. Because I needed a war to rise."

The orc set down his cup.

"I suspected," he gravelled. "It was too personal for you. More than it ever was when you were pruning away the undesirables in Callow."

"In sparing him, I killed thousands," I said. "I used them as a tool. And that's despicable, Hakram. I hate it, that for a moment I stood in the same place the High Lords do when they decided to hike the taxes or murder a few of my people for convenience. I

think that's the line I can't live with crossing. Being the kind of person that doesn't see people as people, just *objects*."

"The kind of person that would use killing others as fuel for a ritual," he said.

"I know it's different for Praesi," I said. "You read Black's journal, same as me. There were years where sacrifices for the fields were all that kept famine away, and I won't cast stones at people doing ugly shit to survive. But there's no need for that anymore. Not if the grain can come from Callow instead. But it's still done, and there has to be a point where culture isn't an excuse anymore, right? Gods, if it was someone's culture to eat fucking babies does that mean I just have to smile and pretend it's not vile? Because there's a lot of that going around, Hakram. The Matrons are our allies, so we have to pretend the things they do every year to boys just like Robber *because* they're boys aren't revolting. Ratface's own father tried to have him knifed in his bed because he was inconvenient, and I'm supposed to just laugh it off and say 'that's the Taghreb for you, there they go murdering again'? Fuck, I've done dark things but at least I don't pretend it's all right for me to have done them. I don't *encourage* it."

Gods, but it felt good to actually say that out loud. Because I knew who I'd sided with, and now more than ever I knew who I answered to. But there were compromises that rankled. Things I had to pretend I didn't see because I couldn't pick every battle that should be picked and still think I'd win. That was the thing, with stories. They never told you that the ogres had kids that would starve without a father or that the valiant knight that helped you was part of a larger institution that might trigger civil war if left unchecked. If you wanted a clean ending, one that didn't leave a bad taste in the mouth, you had to end the story just after the victory. Otherwise you got to see that you could win loudly once, send Evil skittering back into the dark, but that everywhere across Creation there were lesser evils taking place every hour of every day and there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

"Ah," Hakram said softly. "You hadn't realized."

I looked at him.

"That Kilian is Praesi," he said. "With all that entails."

"She doesn't *need* to do this," I said, almost pleadingly. "She's not as powerful as she could be, it's true. But she's still better than the average Legion mage. If it came down between her dying and the ritual being made, Gods forgive me but I'd do it. Because I'm in love with her, and I'm selfish and I'd rather be a monster than lose her. But it's not going to kill her, to be who

she is. This is just wanting more for herself at the expense of others."

"She can do it legally," Hakram said. "Using death row criminals at auction."

"I know that," I said through gritted teeth. "And I know that the people who'd bleed wouldn't be choir children. That they'll die anyway, probably on another altar in a way that benefits someone else. That even in Praes you don't get the noose lightly. But if they hang, Hakram, that's law. That's the exercise of justice, or the closest the Wasteland can have to it. There's a difference between hanging someone for a crime and slitting their throat open so your magic comes more smoothly. And it stings that I shared my bed with someone for more than a year who doesn't get something that basic."

I drained the rest of my cup.

"Gods, is *human sacrifice* too low a bar to set?" I said, and I felt exhausted. "Because in my enemies I'll live with it. Until I can make them stop, and I will. But Kilian's on my side. Used to be a lot more than that. And I refuse that this should be who we are."

I looked at the orc.

"What's the point of any of this, if we're just the High Lords with a nicer reputation?" I asked. "I'm not better than her even if she does this, Hakram. I'm probably worse, if a count can be kept for things like this. And we both know I'll do worse things before this is over. But I won't put on a smile and pretend this is all right. I'm not willing to be that person, not even for Kilian."

The tall orc finished his cup.

"This is," he said, "half the conversation you needed to have. Perhaps you should seek the other half."

He left the tent, left me alone with the words I'd spoken still filling the silence. They were no comfort. Never had been.

## Chapter 38: Host

*"It is said that the founding First Prince spoke of Procer as a great tower, every principality a stone raising it to ever greater heights. I have found the sentiment more poetic than accurate. Procer is no single tower but twenty-three of them, and their owners constantly steal each other's stones to rise at the expense of the others."*

-Extract from 'The Labyrinth Empire, or, A Short History of Procer', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Even having kept out most of the general staff, the pavilion was crowded. Enough that we'd had to bring in a second table to shove at the end of our usual one, a ramshackle assembly Pickler had covered with a tablecloth in a move that fooled absolutely no one. It made me want to wince a little, considering who was seated around it. We were looking like disorganized amateurs to some of the most powerful people in Callow. The wine, at least, they couldn't complain about. Northern red, because I sure as Hells wasn't breaking into my own stash for the sake of people I mostly couldn't stand, but decent vintage and cooled by mages. I'd helped myself to a cup early because I already had a feeling this conference was going to scrape my nerves raw. If there wasn't frost on something before this was over, I owed Hakram more than I should have willingly bet. I'd stolen a horse – with wings, even – from Arcadia as well as gems and my favourite chair, but I had no illusions Zombie the Third would still be in one piece when the dust settled this year. That meant buying another charger, and those were *costly*.

To the left, Duchess Kegan Iarsmai of Daoine was seated, managing to convey general disapproval at the existence of everybody else without her face actually turning up in a sneer. I was reluctantly impressed by the feat, which was magic in its own right. Her second had taken a chair for once, the hooded and silent man I'd taken way too long to learn was called Commander Adair. The head of the Watch, though his title was just that and not a Name. That hadn't always been the case, historically speaking, but as far as I knew the last Commander had been killed by my own teacher years before the Conquest. Something about skirmishes with the orc clans that lived in the Lesser Steppes had prompted him to step in, and explained how Black had forged bonds with prominent chieftains like Grem One-Eye and Istrid Knightsbane before the Praesi civil war.

To the right, the senior officers of the Legions of Terror had clustered. Marshal Ranker was at the heart of them, not even her blackened twisted hand managing to make the sight of a wrinkled goblin her size perched on a cushioned stool entirely humourless. She'd brought her own Staff Tribune and on her other side sat General Afolabi Magoro. The dark-skinned man had been less than fond of me even before I'd publicly spanked him for speaking out of line, and since then never faced me with anything less than the blank emotionless mask that was taught to all Soninke highborn from the cradle. Tonight, though, there was something wary about him. The Empress had been good as her word, I mused. Malicia had whispered in the right ears and made it clear that those who did not fall in line behind me were earning her displeasure as well as mine.



It would be a lot easier to dislike the monsters I worked with if they weren't so competent, I thought.

Adjutant was seated at my left, a courtesy offered to Juniper who'd taken his usual place at my right instead. If the Hellhound was nervous at the prospect of addressing hardened veterans most of which outranked in both formal authority and experience, there was no trace of it on her broad face. The only cup of wine my general had taken had been duly watered, and left mostly untouched. Of her general staff, only three had been called to sit across us. Ratface, though mere a Supply Tribune, had the place of honour. The report he was slated to give was by far the most important. Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara flanked him on one side, here as much because she knew the duty rosters of the Fifteenth like the back of her hand as because I intended on picking her brains about the people here after the conference was over. The last addition was Grandmaster Brandon Talbot, and it had been a row to get him a seat in here at all. Juniper had made it clear she didn't trust him in the least, commander or not, but I'd stood my ground. The same reasons she disliked him were why he needed to be in here: he was a voice for the Callowans, something none of my other senior officers could feasibly pass for. Considering more than half the Fifteenth had never stepped foot in the Wasteland, there was a need for that now. The Hellhound might not like it, but it was the truth.

It was more people than I would have liked, for a conference this sensitive, but the realities of the situation had imposed. The soldiers gathered outside formed the largest host Callow had seen since the Conquest, but it wasn't near as united as the forces that had fought. A little less than half of them were Deoraithe, loose allies to me at the best of times, and the chain of command on the Praesi side was a fucking mess. That I was on top, no one could deny. Under that, though? Marshal Ranker had everyone else beat in rank and seniority, but Juniper commanded the largest legion by far and answered to me alone. Afolabi wasn't a contender in this sense, but he had connections in the Wasteland and his Twelfth had gotten off the lightest casualty-wise from our expedition through Arcadia. That Kegan openly feuded with Ranker and spoke to Juniper like she was a particularly stupid child had made any attempts to keep things civil in the past a throbbing headache.

"All right, everyone's here," I eloquently begun. "We'll begin the march south tomorrow at dawn, but before we do it's time everybody was brought in on the campaign plans."

"That would be pleasing," Duchess Kegan said coldly.

"Unorthodox, making plans without your senior commanders," Marshal Ranker added.

I reached for my cup, and reminded myself I still needed those two. It wasn't feasible to shove them both in a bag and run away with their armies as they fought inside.

"Our operations are contingent on factors none of you have the clearance to know about," Juniper growled.

"A *Marshal of Praes* lacked clearance?" General Afolabi said.

I turned to Adjutant.

"Hakram, you seen my pipe?" I nonchalantly asked.

The Soninke stiffened in his seat.

"In your tent," the orc sighed.

"What a shame," I said, and gave Afolabi a friendly grin.

I could have done without the approving look from Kegan, or Talbot for that matter. Just because I was stepping on the fucker didn't mean I was any fonder of the rest of them.

"Before we set out, certain logistics have to be seen to," Juniper said. "Our host currently numbers near forty thousand soldiers. The battles in Arcadia saw an unusually high proportion of wounded, many with wounds that are beyond mage healing. Supply Tribune Bishara, report."

Aisha inclined her head a fraction, then addressed the table in a calm voice that was very clearly trained.

"As you are all aware, the Imperial-held city closest to our camp is Vale," she said. "Though it is not garrisoned at the moment and has proved recalcitrant to assist the Legions of late, this situation has been remedied."

Marshal Ranker eyed me.

"You have people in the city?" she asked.

I raised an eyebrow.

"In a manner of speaking," I said.

To be accurate, Thief had people in the city and she'd gotten in touch with them. That she'd been able to do that at all had interesting implications. Namely, that the Guild of Thieves had access to a form of communication swifter than riders. It couldn't be scrying, since they shouldn't have the mages for that and scrying was a lot less common than my exposure had led me to believe. The High Lords used it and so did the Legions, but outside those ranks it was actually fairly rare. Less now than before I'd been born, since the Warlock had published a spell

formula on par with the ones the old Wasteland families had kept to themselves, but in Callow there weren't a lot of mages that could scry. Same with most nations outside our borders as well: the highest tier of practitioners in Procer and the rest might know how, but even then not as proficiently as Praesi. The knowledge had been slow to trickle out of the Empire, though it was only a matter of time before it did. Still, that Thief had a trick that worked along same lines had been both intriguing and helpful. She'd contacted the guildmaster in Vale and gotten the man to pass the messages I needed.

"Though we will detach two mage lines to keep the worst of the wounded stable, treatment will have to be deferred to outside institutions," Aisha continued.

I felt more than one look cast towards me at that. Though she'd not spoken the name, none of these people were unaware that 'outside institutions' meant the House of Light. Brothers and Sisters sworn to the Heavens, healing legionaries of the Tower. It wasn't without precedent on individual basis, I knew from my childhood in Laure, but cooperation that open certainly was. I'd had to reach out to Governess-General Kendal to get that stone rolling, since she had pull with the priests. I spent more time negotiating than stabbing people that deserved it, nowadays, which never failed to foul my mood even if it was necessary. My Staff Tribune inclined her head again, her contribution finished for the moment. Marshal Ranker was the first to speak up.

"Akua Sahelian," she said. "Do we have a read on her locations? I dislike sending off wounded without escort until we know she'd not going to ambush them."

"Nothing solid," I said. "Unless Duchess Kegan has something to share?"

It was an open secret among the people in the pavilion that what Diabolist was up to involved fucking with whatever empowered the Watch. She might have means to keep an eye on the other villain we didn't know about.

"She's still in Callow," Kegan reluctantly said. "We know nothing more."

"So far the Diabolist has avoided direct confrontation with the Legions," Adjutant gravelled. "While this cannot be relied on, if she seeks to damage the armed forces of the Empire she has better targets."

The three legions in Holden, under Juniper's mother. They'd been warned to keep an eye on the sky just in case.

"Wounded legionaries and a civilian city are an easy target," General Afolabi said. "If ritual fodder is what she seeks, Vale is wide open."

"The Diabolist can strike any city in Callow if she wants," Juniper grunted. "There isn't much we can do about it. Vale is still the best bet for our wounded."

I drummed my fingers on the table.

"I've seen the most of Akua of anyone in this room, as far as I know," I said, leaving a heartbeat for someone to disagree. No one did. "From what I understand of her, she's not going to actively harm Praesi military strength unless it's set against her. No matter what she's cooked up in Liesse, she's going to need the Legions in the coming years. She wants to be in charge of more than just a flying city and for that she needs armies."

"You believe she means to overthrow Her Dread Majesty," General Afolabi said.

He didn't seem particularly surprised. Whether it was because he hid it well or because of course Akua was going to try to take over the Empire, I couldn't tell.

"She'll need more than Liesse if she wants to breach the Tower," Ranker snorted. "Even if the Empress doesn't dig into the nasty stuff down in the vaults, it remains the most heavily fortified place on Calernia."

"Better schemers than I have failed to predict what Diabolist is after," I said flatly. "Guesswork will lead us nowhere, and we have more pressing concerns."

I glanced at Juniper.

"The supply situation has been addressed," the tall orc said. "Supply Tribune Ratface, elaborate."

The Taghreb bastard smiled lazily.

"We've been in touch with the Legion headquarters in Ater and they're sending rations and armaments down, but it'll take at least three weeks to get it all in order," he said. "Until then, we'll be relying on brave Callowan volunteers to ship us food down the Hwaerte."

"You mean smugglers," Talbot said, lips thinning.

"Food is food, Grandmaster," Ratface replied, managing to make the title sound like an insult. "Unless you would prefer magnificently legal starvation, of course. That could also be arranged."

Ranker's Staff Tribune coughed into his hand to disguise a laugh, but his Marshal didn't even bother to hide her smirk. Fucking Hells, you'd think a literal god out for our blood would be enough to make them stop sniping at each other for a week.

"Ratface," I warned.

"No offense was meant, my good knight," the Taghreb apologized.

I turned a dark look on him and he made an effort to look a little more contrite. We'd be having words about this later, and by the face Juniper was making that would be after she got done with him.

"You're all aware we'll be marching on Dormer," I said. "We'll be keeping to the river as we go down, for ease of transport. It'll delay us some but if we keep the pace we'll arrive at the city in time to pre-empt the Queen of Summer."

"Yes, the Queen," Duchess Kegan said. "She has already demonstrated her ability to wipe out hundreds in moments. How is this do be dealt with?"

"I expected Warlock's boy to be here to explain that," Marshal Ranker noted.

"Hierophant is currently making preparations," I lied.

Masego had bluntly told me he would rather set himself on fire than attend the conference, and I'd chosen not to fight that battle. This was delicate enough a balance without bringing his lack of social graces into it. The only worse idea I could come up with was bringing Archer, who by now would already have hit on two of them and brawled with a third.

"We will be bringing outside pressure to bear on Summer as we engage them," Adjutant said.

Ranker's eyes narrowed.

"Fae," she said. "You dealt with Winter again."

"I employed the services of a talented negotiator, this time," I replied vaguely.

An understatement. I'd never seen the Empress in her element before, and it had been an... eye-opening experience.

"We don't need to exterminate the enemy host," Juniper said, as if she'd seen nothing difficult about tearing through a bunch of demigods and their mostly invincible magic army. "But a position of strength will need to be achieved before we can force terms on them."

"They won't fall for the same tricks twice," Ranker warned.

"They lost most their winged knights," Grandmaster Talbot said. "But the golden fae proved unusually resilient."

They'd wiped out three quarters of Nauk's force while simultaneously handling the Watch and a brutal pounding from Masego, he meant. They'd been hard fuckers to deal with.

"They're called the Immortals," I said. "And we found a weakness."

"Their standards," Juniper said. "Getting rid of them will sap their strength."

"If this is to be a victory, that must take priority," Kegan said. "I will not send the Watch into the grinder twice without assurances."

"Hierophant will be busy handling the Queen, but I will be deploying Named to settle the matter," I said.

"The nature of the planned engagement has not been touched upon," General Afolabi said.

"We meant to assault Dormer directly," Juniper said.

Ranker scoffed.

"And give them walls?" she said. "That'll double the butcher's bill."

"Open field won't work for us," I said. "We don't have twenty thousand Winter fae in the woods ready to pop out. If we're to have any chance of beating them, they can't be in a position to bring their full force to bear."

"I've read the accounts of the siege in Arcadia," the Hellhound said. "It stood out to me how ill-equipped they were to deal with Legion siege tactics."

"Summer's not used to being on the defence," I said. "And they've never seen anything like goblin munitions or our engines."

"Both of which we could use from our own fortified position," Afolabi pointed out.

"Fae will be weaker in Creation," Kegan said. "The possibility of a field battle has perhaps been too hastily dismissed."

"Your Deoraithe are not trained to deal with the kind of quick redeployments flight allows the fae," Juniper told her bluntly. "Your soldiers would be a liability."

Duchess Kegan looked down her nose at the orc and smiled mockingly.

"Perhaps a more experience voice could weigh in on the matter, girl," she said.

The temperature in the pavilion cooled and the Deoraithe's eyes turned to me.

"*General Juniper* has more experience than you," I smiled brightly. "Since being appointed at the head of the Fifteenth, she has won three pitched battles and a siege. What great victories do you have under your belt, Duchess?"

Ranker's vicious satisfaction was palpable.

"Lady Squire speaks true," Afolabi suddenly said. "Summer has demonstrated it has trouble dealing with unorthodox tactics. I would prefer the walls be ours, but penning them in the city would rob them of several advantages."

I was feeling generous, so I'd chalk that up to him deserving his rank rather than the Empress having had a word with him.

"You have something in mind," Ranker said, studying me. "For Dormer. I'm assuming more elaborate than tossing sharpeners at the walls."

I leaned back into my seat.

"Summer has some skill with fire," I said. "But then, so do we."

*Gods, I thought, it's never a good sign when goblins grin like that.*

## Chapter 39: Exposition

*"It's hard for people to understand what it means to have been part of the Fifteenth. We were farmboys and thieves, not people that were ever supposed to matter. Fodder for noose and ledger. But then she came along, and told us we were to be the doom of gods. Heavens forgive me, but I believed her then and believe her still."*

– Extract from the 'Forlorn Memoirs', author unknown

The banners flew tall in morning wind, carried by the Gallowborne. Two banners now, for I had not forgotten my promise to Talbot. A silver fifteen in Miezán numerals set on black was the herald of my legion, the standard under which it would fight until we were all ground to dust by time or steel. I kept to the colours, but by emblem was different. Silver scales shivered over us, measuring a crown and a sword. The sword weighed heavier, as much on cloth as it did in Creation. House Foundling's words were

sewed under them, the one debt I owed Akua Sahelian I would never be able to repay. *Justifications matter only to the just.* Grim words, perhaps, but none had rung more true since I'd taken the knife and the offer behind it. Juniper had not commented on them after an initial guarded glance. The two of us marched with the vanguard, though when we came in sight of Dormer she would retreat to her command post to rule over the battlefield. The Hellhound killed with her mind, not her hands. She was more terrible an opponent for it.

Ahead of us lay plains that had once been green, before Summer came to own them. Now half the land was scorched black and the rest lusher than was possible in Creation. Orchards bore fruits regardless of the season, fields already harvested grew again tall and golden wheat. There would be food shortages, in the coming months. My homeland had seen war twice in three years, this one even more devastating than the last. Even if the blackened earth was made cultivable again, how many of those fields would lack men to till them? Summer had killed many, harmed more and I knew Akua would bring deeper wounds still. She was of the old breed, the one whose madness was worthy of some awe if only for the scale of its folly. Walking the aftermath of Three Hills I'd gotten a glimpse of what that felt like. Seen fate written in mud and blood and eerie green flame, and though doom had lurked in that vision when I'd thought of embracing it I had felt so gloriously *alive*.

I'd fought battles since then. Desperate ones, and the pull of that first moment had long faded. It would have been a lie to say I did not still relish in victory, in breaking whatever lay in path, but I had been tempered by so many dances on the blade's edge. It was one thing to gamble the lives of strangers for your purposes, to risk it all on a roll of the dice, but I'd come to dread it. I'd won more often than not, so far, but how long could I keep that up? My mistake had been coming to love them. It was also my last saving grace. How easy it would have been to become like Black, utterly divorcing affection and necessity, if I'd not found a family in my companions. My teacher had done great things, by embracing that cold unfeeling clarity. But atrocious ones as well, and I would not follow him down that road. The more my Name and the mantle I had stolen from Winter set me apart from humanity, the more I understood I had to grasp tightly onto it. The thing I'd become otherwise would care nothing for what I wanted to build.

"We've come a long way from the College, haven't we?" I said.

For once, Juniper did not chide me for being foolishly sentimental. The Hellhound had been my opponent once, I thought, if never quite my enemy. It felt like a colourless dream now. I'd grown to rely so much on her that I'd feel lost if she was gone.



"Didn't think much of you, back then," she grunted. "Too mouthy. Not as clever as you believed you were."

"I never did manage to get the drop on you, after the once," I chuckled.

It was a strange thing, recognizing that someone was cleverer than you. And Juniper was, I would not deny it. It wasn't so clear-cut a thing as most people pretended when posturing, of course. Cleverness was no perfect shield. The smartest woman in the world could be outmanoeuvred by a fool, under the right circumstances. Or by luck, or by a myriad other factors that no one ever really liked to talk about. But the fact remained that Juniper saw things I didn't, when it came to strategy. Pondered a few steps deeper, arranged her thoughts more clearly. Diabolist did the same, when it came to plotting, and it had little to do with her Name. There was always someone better. I'd felt slighted by that when I was younger, as if just by being me I had to be the best at everything I undertook. Nowadays I just felt relieved, that I had someone at my side who could steer us away from the mistakes I would have made. Was there anything more worthless than pride, if the cost of it was the death of those precious to you?

"You always get strange before battles," Juniper sighed. "After too, sometimes. Like you're far away."

That was pretty funny, coming from a woman who was in the custom of finding high ground to sleep on whenever a fight was finished. And that was without mentioning how she'd apparently napped through the latter part of the Battle of Marchford.

"You're odder than me," I said. "Calm as you are. Nauk can't stop grinning for half a day before a battle."

"Hakram doesn't," she said.

"Hakram's different," I replied.

She grunted, conceding the point.

"Used to think he was a coldblood," Juniper admitted. "Everything was surface deep with him. Nothing real under."

Coldblood. A disease of the mind, I'd been taught. People who felt less, didn't get remorse or really understand consequences. Adjutant had told me some things in the dark that let me see why she'd thought him one. What she'd taken for absence was just apathy.

"I take after my father more," the orc said.

I looked at her, surprise. She rarely talked about her family, and what little she did was only about her mother.

"He's the one who raised you, right?" I said.

"Until the College," she said. "He's always been... calm."

"So he lost the rite of raising," I said.

The orc looked amused.

"Read that in a Soninke book, did you?" she said.

"Taghreb, I think," I shrugged. "I had a lot of books plopped onto my lap before meeting you, the titles kind of meld together nowadays."

"The custom exists," she said. "But only Praesi think it's common. If a couple needs to fight to choose who'll raise the child, they shouldn't be having children. It's a sign of immaturity."

"Well, I learned something today," I mused.

She bared the faintest hint of her fangs in what I knew to mean amusement. Or flirtation. Probably the former, all things considered.

"I have it too," she said suddenly. "My mother's blood. The battle-joy."

I studied her in silence.

"I was born for this," she said. "Of this. It's what I am and I can't remember ever craving anything else."

It was always hard to tell with orcs, but I thought she looked uncomfortable. Almost ashamed. No fangs visible, hairless brows pressing together.

"We're supposed to want glory for the clan," she said. "To make our own grow stronger. But all I saw were fucking huts and cattle and I couldn't wait to leave. I almost ran away, when I was younger. There's only so many times you can sketch out formations in the dirt before you feel *choked*."

I knew that feeling. I had followed me in Laure, when I was waiting tables and picking up bruises in the Pit when I should have been in the Wasteland, learning at the College. Like I was just wasting away my days. That I should have been out there doing something, *anything* but just sifting through the muck to earn enough coin to really begin my life.

"I hate the orphanage, at the end," I quietly said. "It wasn't that they were out to get me, it was just..."

"In the way," Juniper finished. "Quicksand you'd get stuck in if you waited too long."

She laughed hoarsely.

"I used to fight battles in my head when herding aurochs," the orc said, almost sounding like she was mocking herself. "All the victories of the Conquest, how I could have won them better."

"I kept a tally of who I'd kill when I had the authority," I admitted. "Mazus was always top of the list. But then he hanged, and it had little to do with me."

Juniper hesitated.

"What Lord Black was to you," she said. "You were to me."

My face flickered in surprise.

"Not a mentor," she growled, but the irritation petered out. "The offered hand, I mean. If I hadn't become your legate I'd be a junior officer in someone else's legion right now. I never thanked you for that."

"Don't," I said. "I wouldn't have gotten this far without you, Juniper. Stings to admit it, but it's true."

"Wouldn't be the same without you either," she said. "It's not about the rank, Catherine. The rank is just what gets me there. I want..."

There was something burning in my general then that I'd never seen in her before. I'd seen her cold and amused and furious and irritated more times than I could count. I'd even seen her tender, though only with Aisha.

"More," she said, sounding angry at the inadequacy of the word. "Three Hills, Marchford even Arcadia. No one's fought like that before. We get to *make* that. They'll study our battles, centuries from now. Some other girl stuck herding godsdamned aurochs will think about our mistakes, how she could have outsmarted our opponents."

"Making history," I mused.

She laughed.

"Fuck history," she said. "We're changing the face of *war*. And it's just beginning, Catherine. The storm ahead will make this all look like drizzle."

Ahead was Dormer, the full might of Summer and the Queen that ruled it. But she thought beyond that, and so did I. The Diabolist had carved doom out of stone and sorcery, and she would not quietly into the night. And on the horizon, Procer sharpened its blades. In a year or ten, the Principate would come calling and with the greatest army on the face of Calernia. There would be heroes in that host, and not like the ones I'd killed. The real legends, the heroes weren't bound to small stories like mine. The Calamities were the greatest monsters of the age, but they'd lived so long because they kept their wars small and their enemies distracted. One day the great Named of the other side would come forward and the old wars would be born again. Those that warped the lands, flattened mountains and burned cities. I'd have to be ready for them, for the people who wanted to make my home the battlefield of the continent again. If I could not have peace in truth, then I would settle for the peace of the grave.

It was the kind of victory I'd been trained for.

"I don't think," I said quietly, "that we'll be remembered fondly. Not you, and certainly not me."

"Ah," Juniper of the Red Shields smiled. "But they *will* remember us."

Silence reigned for a long moment after that, more comfortable than I would have thought. The Hellhound wasn't someone who felt the need to fill the air with words when she had nothing to say. Something I'd grown to appreciate, since Archer had joined by band. The quiet was how I came to hear it even though the wind blew the other way and we were ahead of the thick of the host. The Fifteenth and its allies trailed at our back like a great snake of glittering steel, and it was from my legionaries that the song came. Lightly, at first, the words indistinct even to my Name-sharpened ears. But after the first time it was sung, thousands more voices joined in. Even the vanguard around us.

"I was born out in the green where their banners flew high  
And the boots of the great lords they did tread over us  
Oaths we made and service gave, kneeling to the oldest lie  
But now the world's turned around and we sing this chorus."

Orcs and goblins. Soninke and Taghreb. But, most of all, Callowans. The muster of my homeland sang, light and bright but there was such *anger* underneath. It scared me. My veins sang with it, but it scared me.

"Come forth you old devils,  
Bring out your lesser evils  
Blight the skies and the land  
You'll be met sword in hand

One day your children'll tell  
Of the deep and rebel yell,  
That on his field so sombre  
Conquered host of horror."

Juniper looked up at the sun. The red-painted steel had warmed over the march, though like most orcs she did not sweat easily.

"I wondered if they'd sing it," she said.

"You knew about this?" I said quietly.

"Aye," she said. "Nauk penned part. Named it too. *In Dread Crowned.*"

Gods, what had I unleashed? I'd thought I understood. That I had crafted an escapement for what would have made Callow claw at itself, a release that would let it change and escape the curse that defined it. But it wasn't just Callowans that sang. Greenskins and Praesi joined their voices to the chorus, and though their anger was of a different make it was no less harsh for it. There was a story the House of Light liked to use in sermons. That on the day of the First Dawn, the Gods Below had created all the evil in the world and released it. The Gods Above had caught it all in the box without a lock, and Creation would have been as the Heavens had the first of men not opened it, seduced by the whispers of devils promising godhood lay within. That was why the brothers and sisters taught rules, the priests said. So that on the last of days, when Good triumphed, the evils would be forced into the box again. Again it would be without a lock, but mankind would have learned. They would not open it again.

I'd carved a crack into the box and now the insides were spilling out. It hadn't been evils, inside. It had been anger. Bitter old anger that had not before been given a banner to rally under. It had one, now. It flew behind me, scales that weighed crown and sword and found the crown wanting. There was a promise there I had not meant, but was written for all to see.

"On the plain where folk were fair we stood and greatly slew,  
And by the ford a score devils with a great demon too  
Prince and page and swordsman proud to our steel they all fell  
The world stolen we take back and damn you all to Hell

The chorus came again. My blood ran cold, and pressed against my ear the Beast laughed. It was awake, alive and savouring every moment of this with malevolent glee. *Blood*, it whispered. *There will be blood over this.* The Fifteenth Legion sang, and declared war on the mighty of the world. My general was looking at me.

"You promised a revolution, Warlord," Juniper said.

She bared her teeth, perfect ivory fangs.

"We will not settle for anything less."

She laughed, harsh but joyous.

"Did I not tell you?" she said. *"They will remember us."*

It spread. To the legionaries of the Twelfth and the Fourth, men and women not bound to me. To the Deoraithe, though not as many. I had gathered forty thousand soldiers to my banner, and they sang of treason to the morning sky. I could hear refrains in it, slivers of people I knew. Robber's sharp, vicious smile as he whispered *they kill us for sport*. The fever in Ratface's eyes as he said *they'll never stop unless we make them*. Pickler's warning, echoed in every chorus. *It'll be to the death, Foundling. Do not begin this lightly*. I'd spoken the words. Those had consequences, for Named more than any other. *If you employ violence*, the Empress had told me, *in violence they will follow*. I had not made peace. I had traded one war for another, and this one would be a thousand times bloodier than the last. I would be woe unto all I beheld, the Queen of Summer had so sadly told me. There had been a weight to the name when it was granted to me and finally I was feeling it in full. I'd thought I owned this, because I'd been the one to speak the words. That I could control it. Oh but the arrogance of that. You couldn't break open a dam and order the river.

I had taught them this. And Gods, they had learned. One decision after another, spitting in the eye of gods and compromise both, and I had promised them that if we paid the butcher's bill we could change the world. I'd told Archer that there was something happening in the Empire beyond any of us. That they were not in control. Neither, I understood then, was I.

"Be they high or resplendent our oaths stand taller still  
And in the west do quiet lie graves we have yet to fill  
Learn ye mighty that from Tower's shade to vales of red  
The Fifteenth by call of horn stands ever crowned in dread."

The song carried us all the way to Dormer. Behind broken walls Summer awaited us, a riot of silk and steel not of Creation. We had made good time, as it was not long past Noon Bell. We had until dawn before a god in the flesh came to destroy us.

It was no longer, I thought, the worst of my problems.

## Chapter 40: Rising Action

*"When approaching a siege, a general must draw distinction between tactical and strategic importance. The costs of a victory on the tactical theatre of a campaign may yield defeat on the*

*strategic one."*

– "Considerations on Warfare", by Marshal Grem One-Eye

Most towns and cities in the south were lightly fortified, but Dormer was an exception. While it was true that since House Alban had united Callow there'd been relatively little war in the south, the barony had roots that ran much further back than that. In the days when the Kingdom of Liesse had held sway over the south, clashing with a stubbornly independent Marchford and the encroaching Kingdom of Laure, Dormer had been made vassal to the rulers of the south by force of arms. That submission had never sat quite right with the rulers of the city, and they'd rebelled against the kings of Liesse several times. It all went back to the Wasaliti river and the island it flowed down to: Mercantis. The barons of Dormer had old ties to the City of Bought and Sold, and grown wealthy as the middlemen between it and the rest of Callow. Wealthy enough to afford tall walls, and later a fortress to overlook their demesne. There'd been little need to keep improving these after the unification of Callow, though, and revenue had been hurt by the tariffs set from Laure that had the coin going into the pockets of House Alban instead.

The city had grown beyond the ancient walls, with most of it now outside the grey stone and the fortress behind it. It was not a particularly large city, truth be told. At its peak after the Conquest there'd been perhaps fifteen thousand souls living there. Now there were more than twice that number of fae holding it, and no trace of the Callowans that should be there. A disquieting thing, that, but also a relief of sorts. If some of my countrymen had remained inside, I would have hesitated to use some of the more brutal tactics in my arsenal. Considering the opposition, that might have been costly. I'd beaten Summer once before, in Arcadia, but I'd done so relying on tricks and a story. I wouldn't have the benefit of either here, and that meant having to crush them the old fashioned way. I did, however, have some advantages on my side. The first was that this was a siege.

I'd grown up thinking of the Legions of Terror as a field army, but that was a somewhat false perception. It was true the Legions were most remembered for the Fields of Streges, when they'd near wiped out the armies of the kingdom, but most the battles in the Conquest had been sieges. The Blessed Isle, Summerholm and Laure. The campaign against Daoine in the north had not been so clear-cut, but it *had* involved taking the Wall. To understand the Legions as an institution, I'd come to realize, I had to keep in mind what Black had crafted them for: conquering Callow. Warfare in the kingdom had been deeply influenced by the nature of constant invasions, most of them Praesi. The cities of the west and the north were hard fortresses meant to resist Praes until House Fairfax could send an army to turn back the Legions, and so Callowans had grown adept at making fortresses. Our mages had learned protective magics and wards, passed down sorceries meant

to banish devils and disrupt great rituals. Our armies fielded more heavy cavalry than any other on Calernia and around the professional core that had been the Royal Guard, massed volunteers had formed the bread and butter of Callow's hosts. All of it evolved to beat the large mage and villain-led hordes that used to be the staple of Praesi armies.

When the Conquest had begun, what House Fairfax faced was an entirely different beast. Orcs no longer used as meatshields for better-trained humans but armed in good steel and taught to stand in ranks. Goblins, once little more than expendables sent to die against walls or let loose on the countryside, instead turned into crossbowmen and sappers. Mages no longer standing at the back to unleash rituals but massed in the ranks to replace a few dangerous tricks by continuous deployable firepower. Summerholm, the famous Gate of the East, had fallen not to devils and flying fortresses but trebuchets and ballistas backed by full encirclement. The Legions of Terror had been built to take some of the most heavily-fortified cities on the face of the continent, and while the tight formations they used on the field were less effective in city streets, those narrow passages where were munitions and mage lines shone.

The second was that I was dealing with an enemy who knew little of this breed of warfare. The winner of the war between Summer and Winter was decided either behind closed doors or on a battlefield, not by borders and walls. The forces of the Count of Olden Oak had taught me a hard lesson when I'd taken the Gallowborne scouting in the grass, but when we'd assaulted his fortress his army had crumpled under the pressure. Summer was not meant to be on the defensive, and what I'd come to consider the greatest weakness of the fae was that they were not *adaptable* the way a mortal host would be. They would have learned from our clashes in Arcadia, of course. They weren't that crippled by their nature. But when faced with an unknown, something unprecedented, they tended to revert back to pattern. That made them predictable, to an extent, and the handful of monstrous tacticians I had on my side could make a lot out of the enemy being predictable.

I knew better than to think I knew all the cards the other side had to play. Even putting aside the fact that the Queen of Summer was on her way and she'd be a whole mess of her own, I'd glimpsed powers in the dream that had followed my becoming Duchess of Moonless Nights that I'd yet to see them deploy. They were out of princes and princesses to lead them, but there was at least one Duke left and they were not entities to take lightly. Summer, by now, would be desperate to take back the Princess of High Noon. They wouldn't be pulling any punches, and even though crossing into Creation would have weakened them this time I didn't have Winter to use as fodder on my flank. It'd be my armies that took the brunt of the losses, and like the Summer Queen I couldn't



afford to take too many of those. Not when Diabolist was still on the loose, growing more dangerous by the day. On the other hand, I also couldn't afford to be overly cautious. If the fae in Dormer weren't in deep trouble by the time their Queen popped out, she wouldn't even consider treating with me. Which I really, *really* needed her to do. Actually taking her out was beyond my capacity. The best Hierophant could do was delay, and when that failed it would swiftly begin going downhill for us.

It was Marshal Ranker that opened the dance.

After the first few fae patrols were repulsed by sheer numbers, Summer had retreated to the city. No sign of the Immortals yet, which we'd taken to mean they would be behind the walls. Thief and Archer were already gone to deal with that. Out in the streets and houses we'd could only see Summer regulars, and those were the first obstacle moving forward. Hard to gauge numbers on grounds like those, but there should be at least thirty thousand. Using the buildings as cover, they would turn Dormer into a butcher's yard if we advanced. *So we take away the cover.* The trebuchets let loose and the ballistas with them, ripping through the centre of the outskirts. Houses collapsed, a handful of fae crushed, and the sappers began their work. The ballistas were faster by a fair margin, but it was the trebuchets that did the heavy lifting. Stone after stone, they began reducing the outer city to rubble.

"And now we see if they take the bait," Hakram gravelled.

I hummed but did not reply. The Gallowborne had given the two of us wide berth, save for Tribune Farrier. He carried my banner, though he'd pass it when we entered the fray. Juniper had predicted that after we began smashing the outer city the fae would try to grab back the initiative by breaking our siege engines. For the average Legion of Terror, that would have been a problem. We were lighter on archers than most Calernian armies, since mage lines effectively served the same function. Wouldn't be the case for us, though. We had something the Empire had never fielded before: the army of Daoine. Flatly inferior to legionaries when it came to heavy infantry, save for the Watch, but when it came to archers? They'd used longbows to defend the Wall for centuries, and fae were nothing new to them. It might be greenskins that had tried their borders most of the time, but Praesi had made attempts too. There wasn't as much difference between winged devils and fae as the latter would like to think.

"And there they go," I muttered.

Ten thousand wings lit up and the Fair Folk rose into the sky. The height of the flight would be the most pressing issue, here. It wasn't like the Deoraithe could shoot halfway to the moon, while fae could just pour arrows downwards while staying out of range. That was our first trap. Hierophant wouldn't be taking the

field for most of this battle because I needed him to control the three wards he'd prepared, and I watched the soldiers of Summer as they flew straight into the first of those. They didn't have time to ever fire a volley before a buzz so loud it was half a thunderclap filled the air. Their wings winked out for two heartbeats, then the buzz sounded again and they reappeared. Only a handful fell, making it to the ground before being filled with arrows. An oscillation ward, Masego had called it. He'd essentially made a massive rectangle in the sky where ever two heartbeats the flow of sorcery would be disrupted. I'd asked him if he could just shut them down, but apparently that would have been too much of a drain to maintain. Even with the new Name he still had limits.

What it accomplished was make it exceedingly hard for the fae to just hover over the engines and leisurely set them on fire. If they wanted to make a dent, they'd have to descend into arrow range. Our little surprise spread chaos in their ranks. Half kept trying and failed repeatedly while the rest went down out of the ward's area and began to trade fire with the Deoraithe. They had the better of it, to my distaste. Kegan's soldiers were spread out, tight ranks would have been a written invitation to be hit with the fire arrows, but a loose formation was far from the equivalent of flying in the godsdamned sky. As soon as the situation steadied below, the fae who'd been struggling with the ward joined the others and I watched as five knots formed led by fae nobles. By the feel of them, nothing higher than a baron.

"That," I said, "is going to be trouble. Ritual?"

"Close enough," Hakram grunted. "No more than twenty in each formation. We'll hold."

We'd better. The battle was going to get a lot harder if we lost those trebuchets. All five knots formed large spears of flame easily the size of ten men in a line, and after a heartbeat they shot down at our five trebuchets. My fingers clenched as the projectiles fell, crackling loudly until they hit thin air. The shape of blue domes covering our engines shone as the fae sorcery tried to tear through, and though they shivered in the end they held. Close. Much too close for comfort. The entirety of the Fourth's mage contingent was feeding those shields and the fae had almost broken through anyway.

"If they keep pounding away at us with those I'm not sure we'll hold," I murmured.

"Hope Marshal Ranker read them correctly, then," Hakram replied.

The old goblin, when going over the battle plan, had made one prediction: *they will not be willing to get into a slugging match*. Whoever led the host of Summer would be trying to minimize casualties at all costs, and that meant backing away from tactics

that were effective if they got too expensive. The Deoraithe continued to trade arrows, losing two men for every fae they took, and I grimaced. We couldn't afford to slug it out for too long either. Another volley of flame spears descended, and finally we have answer. The Fifteenth's mages had gone through the College same as any other legion's, with one major difference: Masego. Who was occasionally willing to throw my mage lines a bone in the form of a ritual, if he was in the right mood for it. In Marchford, when it had become clear that our numbers in legionaries had far outgrown the quantity of mages that traditional legion structure dictated we should have to match it, Juniper and I had diverged from standard doctrine. We'd consolidated them under Kilian and drilled them in use of rituals. Now we'd see if that was going to pay off.

Two massive javelins of lightning formed above our shields and struck across the sky. The fae scattered around them even as the Fourth's mages desperately tried to keep the fae fire from reaching the siege engines. The javelins blew and streaks of lightning spread, killing scores of Summer soldiers but failing to disrupt any of the knots that forged the spears. *And so now we begin our staring contest, you Summer fucks.* There were only so many times the javelin ritual could be cast before my mages started burning out and dying. They knew that. I knew that. What they couldn't know was *how many* times they could. If they were lucky, they might shatter our shields and torch our siege engines before their losses got too high. Or we could trade blows for an hour as they racked up casualties they couldn't afford. Another wave of fire, lightning gave answer. My mages aimed at a knot this time, and killed a few. Useless, as it turned out. If the way a handful of fae from the ranks went back to fill the numbers was true indication, any of them could participate. It must be the barons that were the key.

Two more exchanges. On the last we lost a trebuchet, damn their stubborn hides. The moment the spear went through and touched wood the entire damn engine turned to ashes faster than I could blink. My mages weren't fools, though. On the first round they struck the sides with javelins, herding fae towards the centre, and when they struck there with the second they did real damage. After one success, the fae dug in. A mistake. At least a dozen of Ranker's mages must have died when the shield broke, but the rest went to reinforce the other shields. Another two exchanges where they failed to break through, and I smiled coldly. They'd blinked first. Of the ten thousand who'd come there must have been a little less than eight thousand left, a trade that had cost me at least two lines of mages and over two thousand Deoraithe archers. More of the Summer soldiers had died to the lightning ritual than the bows, by my count. We'd starkly underestimated their agility.

The fae did not retreat. They flew north, and landed on the plains behind us. That, we had seen coming. There were few things

more dangerous to a besieging army than being hit in the back as they stormed the walls. I'd wanted to keep at least two out of the three wards Masego had judged he could handle to bolster our offensive, but Juniper had talked me out of it. There was no point in breaking through ahead if our back was collapsing, she'd said. Our second trap was in that very field where they'd landed. The Fourth under Ranker and the Twelfth under General Afolabi stirred and began to march against the fae at our back. They numbers less than eight thousand, considering Ranker had a chunk of her sappers manning our engines and all her mages shielding them. The Fourth would be significantly weakened because of it. But the cognomen of Afolabi's Twelfth was *Holdfast*. Defence was their speciality, and that was what the two legions had been charged with. A holding action keeping the fae tied up. Masego abandoned the ward in the sky and activated the second one. Wind howled across the plains, surging forth from a line ahead of the two legions. Though it wouldn't kill anything, by our reckoning it should make flight all but impossible and for the fae to keep in tight ranks exceedingly difficult.

There was a drawback, of course. It needed Hierophant's full attention to keep active, and that meant it would cease when the Fifteenth made for the walls. That was the bet we'd made: by the time the engines had finished demolishing us a clear path to the walls, the fae at our back would be in bad enough a position that the two legions holding them would no longer need the help. Risky, Ranker had called it. If we were wrong we'd have to pull back some of the Deoraithe to bolster them, and there was chance if we did that we wouldn't have the numbers to punch through into the inner part of Dormer. It was coin flip. We could not, in the end, predict everything. For one, none of us had thought they'd sent fae nobles out this early. When we closed on the walls had been my own call, and that mistake had come mighty close to fucking us over. Even now, I winced at the notion that General Afolabi was going to have to deal with five barons. The ward could only help so much. If I hadn't sent out Archer already I would have told her to back him up, but the chalice had already been filled.

Even under bombardment by Summer, the engines had not paused. How long had passed, since the battle had begun? At least an hour, maybe more. The trebuchets had levelled us an avenue and cleaned fae out of it, but it would take hours longer yet. We should be done before nightfall, unless we were disrupted. Behind us the two Legions of Terror dug sixty feet behind the edge of the wards and let the fae come to them. It was bloody work. The Summer soldiers found that the empty space beyond the ward was a meat grinder of sharpeners and crossbow bolts leading straight into tight ranks of heavies, and hundreds died before they stopped rushing into the killzone. After that, though, they wised up. Masego's ward was a line that couldn't cover the entire plain. It couldn't even be a curve, since apparently for arcane reasons

that would have been much harder to maintain. The fae began going around and the fight turned truly nasty. General Afolabi pulled back sappers and crossbowmen to back up the regulars he sent to block them, but that weakened his centre. Enough that two of the barons got a foothold.

Those were, to put it bluntly, beyond the ability of munitions to deal with. One of them lit up like a golden bonfire of gold and torched through a solid hundred heavies before being driven back by the Twelfth's mages. The other one screwed with the ward, bending the wind across a dozen feet of the line until it turned around and blew into the lines of the legion. Fae began pouring through immediately and it all went to the Hells after that. Twice, as the hours passed, I almost went to reinforce them. Both times Hakram held me back. We couldn't afford for me to start using my aspects yet. I would say this for Afolabi's legionaries, they stood their fucking ground. When the fae formed a beachhead and it looked like the centre was going to collapse, four lines of heavies went into the thick of it with lightning bolts clearing them a path. There were a few sappers behind their shields, and though half the heavies got wiped in a single stroke of the sword of the baron twisting the wind the goblins threw a dozen demolition charges at him and blew half his head off. Of that near one hundred legionaries that went in, less than twenty made it back to their lines. They'd bought General Afolabi the room he needed, though. The moment the ward returned to full effectiveness, he plugged the gap and forced back the other baron with concentrated spellfire.

An hour before Evening Bell night began to fall, and by then the field was littered with dead. But Ranker had accomplished what she'd set out to do. A straight line to the northern gate of Dormer had been carved out of rubble, the fae still in the outer city split on both sides of it.

"Our turn, now," I quietly told Hakram.

"Do or die," he said.

I gestured at the Gallowborne, and the Fifteenth stirred to march. To war, to Dormer, to doom. Whether it'd be theirs or ours, I could not yet tell.

## Chapter 41: Turning Point

*"Better behind a Tyrant than before them."*  
– Praesi saying

The right to lead the vanguard, as always, belonged to Nauk.

The orc legate was not as clever as Juniper or careful as Hune, but when the time came to hammer in a door there was a reason he

was the man we sent for. More than any other orc I knew, Nauk had no give in him. He was stubborn and aggressive and his men loved him – even the humans, which was no given for a greenskin commander. In Arcadia he'd lost three fourths of his jesha to Summer regulars and the Immortals, and his men had stood their ground without flinching. How many hosts in all of Calernia would have done that, in the face of those kind of casualties? The Battle of Four Armies and One had effectively ended his command and we'd had to repurpose another jesha for him to lead, but he'd taken the reins swiftly. It helped that half the two thousand he now led had been under his nominal authority before I'd taken him north to Laure. Still, if it had been another officer I would have been wary of making them the tip of the spear when their forces were still unblooded and fresh to his command. Not with Nauk, though. What Summer did not kill today would become my vanguard in the wars to come.

My sword hissed against the sheath as it was bared, Hakram hefting his axe at my side. It would be the two of us, in the beginning, without the Gallowborne. The kind of fights I'd be seeking were not ones you took mortals into, however well-trained. Behind us the legionaries of the Fifteenth advanced in tight ranks, shields hefted. Heavies in the front with sappers behind them, about to find out if the tactics Juniper had crafted to deal with fae were effective or not. Our engines had demolished us a clear path to the walls and split the Summer regulars in two, but it would have been madness to assault the ramparts without a solid beachhead. That meant getting in the thick of it, for good or ill. The enemy was not slow in giving answer. Darkness had fallen, but for a heartbeat it felt as if day had come again: across the city flames bloomed and arrows rose into the sky. I was familiar with that trick by now, the fire-driven arrows that detonated upon impact. Watching them tear through the Gallowborne had made sure I would never forget.

Masego's third and last ward activated with a sound like a massive siphon. The arrows flew unabated, but the flames were whisked out of existence. Fire suppression ward. It would cripple our mages as well, prevent them from using fireballs, but Summer lost far more to this than we did. That Hierophant had triggered this one meant the legions at our back had lost their best defence, and all I could do was pray they'd thinned the fae enough they'd be able to hold without it. The dice were thrown, now, and there was no use giving it any further thought. Juniper would handle the rest. Arrows clattered against shields behind us, the testudo formation drilled into the legionaries sparing them from the worst of it. I heard Nauk scream for his men to pick up the pace and left him to it. Hakram and I had other duties before us: we were, it could be said, going *hunting*.

"Where to?" the orc gravelled.

I'd closed my eyes, letting Winter flow through my veins, and opened them only when I found an answer.

"West," I said. "Close to the river. Baron or unusually strong lord."

"It'll be good to shake the rust off before we take on the real threats," he drily said.

We left the road and took a corner around what smelled like an abandoned tannery. Wasn't surprised it was this far out. Most Callowan cities had laws forcing trades that produced fumes that dire to remain on the outskirts, no matter how useful. The streets out here were little more than dirt paths between wooden shacks, most not even broad enough for the two of us to pass through together. Though our entry had not gone opposed, Summer did not disappoint: by the time we reached the first broader street, we ran into our first ambush of the night. The only warning was arrows whistling, betraying the location of silhouettes standing over thatched roofs with bows in hand. I stepped to the side without missing a beat and Hakram had been moving before I'd even noticed. Archers on top, but there would be more. A dozen emerged from abandoned houses at our front and back, swords in hands, as the archers smoothly nocked their second volley.

"See Adjutant, they do love us," I mused. "There's a party and everything."

"Don't play with your food," the orc chided.

We split without needing to warn each other. Fighting with Hakram was like having a third arm, had been ever since he came into his Name. The archers were not amateurs: they aimed where we'd be, not where we were, and even adjusted for swiftness above that of mortals. Not well enough, though. I was quicker than I'd been before Masego had tinkered with my heart, and Adjutant had reflexes that were above even my own. He used his Name more efficiently than me, I'd come to suspect. Hakram barrelled into the fae swordsman, axe splitting open a skull before the arrows even struck ground. As for me, I glanced at a sidewall and made the wager it would survive my weight. A leap saw my foot land on the side of it, then another had me landing in the midst of the archers. They reacted smoothly, swords bared in the blink of an eye, but there were only six. My shield swung out to crush the skull of the one closest to me, and it might as well have been an eggshell. I turned a blade aside and carved open the fae's throat, spinning to turn the swing into another. They barely had time to raise their swords before three were dead.

The ease of it scared me. They had been difficult to deal with, once. Now I broke one's wrist with my shield, pierce into the second one's eye with the tip of my blade and the third made to

retreat. A flick of the wrist and a blade of ice and shadow took her in the back of the neck, snuffed out instantly. The last fae did not even have time to curse before my shield smacked into his face, breaking the chin and crushing the windpipe. Magic made flesh or not, there was no walking that off. Hakram was a whirlwind spinning amidst struggling fae, taking a life with every stroke, but I glimpsed arrowheads through a window at his back. They had, it seemed, kept back archers. I let out a long breath and pushed a sliver of power into my legs. The leap sent me sailing into the air, tearing through the wall and landing on my knees in a shower of shards. Three inside, I saw. One lost his wrist to the first flick and I spun. Second was thrown out the window with his skull crushed by a shield bash. Didn't even need to kill the third. I backed out of the house and let it collapse onto him. That'd been a load-bearing wall, apparently.

"Retreat," a musical voice called out.

I was watching the man it belonged to before he even spoke. The fae around Hakram scattered, though not before his axe harmstrung one's leg and his boot came down to crush her skull. The fae was the one I'd felt earlier, a tall pale man with grey hair that looked made of granite.

"How many titled nobles do you have in the city?" I asked.

"Enough to break you," the fae smiled. "Her Majesty will take your head personally."

Shame I didn't have the time to hack off that one's limbs and bring him back to Masego so the mage could dig out the information.

"Well," I said. "One less after this."

I didn't actually see the arrow coming, and that was telling. It was utterly silent, and all I managed was to have it strike my shoulder instead of my back. It punched straight through plate and I grimaced. He hadn't come alone, and no regular had done this. I broke off the shaft and ice spread over the wound, sealing it shut.

"I think," Hakram said calmly, "that there will be no need to seek them out."

On the outskirts of Dormer, five fae stood around us. One was on the rooftops, green-haired and from the looks of the longbow in his hand he was responsible for that friendly tap I'd just received. Two more in the streets, dark-skinned and wafting smoke. They looked liked twins, one a man and the other a woman, each armed with a short spear and a blade. The last one looked like a Yan Tei, honey-skinned and utterly hairless. She had a



short sword in one hand, and a thin wheel of pale steel in the other.

"All right, so," I hummed. "Correct me if I'm wrong."

I pointed my blade at the twins.

"Baron and baroness," I said, then moved to the longbow man. "Count."

I mulled over the rest a heartbeat.

"Smug weaponless man's a jumped-up lord, and the one who brought a wheel to a swordfight's a countess, but one ahead of the curve," I finished.

"I am not jumped-up," the grey-haired fae hissed.

"That's exactly what you'd say if you were, though," I gently told him.

The smoking twins grinned, and Gods was I glad Archer wasn't there to make something of that. The one who'd looked at what made wagons move and thought 'I bet you could make a weapon out of that' offered a half bow.

"I am the Countess of Wrathful Skies," she said. "Second-in-command to this host. Should you surrender presently, I can guarantee you will not be tortured prior to execution."

"Ah, the Praesi gambit," I mused. "Always a crowd-pleaser. I'm going to have to reply with the famous words of the Duke of Violent Squalls."

Silence reigned for a moment.

"You have not said anything," the man with the bow said.

You had to love that about the fae, if nothing else: you could always count on them to feed you the line.

"Neither did he," I said. "*Because I killed his smug ass.*"

Now that the usual diplomatic niceties were done with, I imagined negotiations were about to break down. Best get ahead of that.

"Think you can handle the twins?" I called out to Hakram.

"Long enough you'll kill your way through the rest, at least," the orc agreed.

And then they tried to shoot him, because they were just *terrible* diplomats. I got a better look at the arrow, this time. Entirely wood, and wreathed in green light. Likely had to do with the

Count's full title, whatever that was. In the heartbeat where Adjutant moved so the shot would skim his pauldron instead of tear through his shoulder, the rest of them moved. Grey hair called on something that had the ground around him denting and every stone in sight turning to dust. The Countess' wheel began spinning and lightning gathered along the sides of it, growing larger by the instant. The smoke wafting from the twins thickened into a cloud that enveloped them entirely. I cracked my neck. This, I thought, was going to be a memorable ride. Best get it over with quickly, or we'd be too battered to handle whatever Duke actually ran this show.

I went for the archer first. If he was actually a Count it was dubious he'd be a pushover in close quarters, but neither Hakram nor I could afford to be watching for arrows at all times while dealing with the rest. Moving faster than anyone should be able to within the bounds of Creation, the green-haired fae had another arrow flying before I'd even made it to another roof. For a moment I thought he'd missed, but he'd never aimed for me at all: the house I was going to use as a stepping stone fell apart in a cloud of dust and I cursed. All right, so they weren't idiots. Which was a real shame. Idiocy was a trait I prized in people trying to kill me. Wrathful Skies attacked before I could change my course, landing at my side wreathed in lightning. When she struck, it was with two blades. One made of steel, going for my throat. The other, lagging slightly behind, was made of lightning. I made the mistake of parrying the short sword and in that instant the lightning connected with our weapons, coursing down my blade and sending down horrid pain and convulsions across my body.

First time I'd ever got hit by a lightning spell. I would not recommend the experience to anyone. I managed to duck the arrow the other fucker shot at my back, but when it struck ground instead green sorcery glimmered and it grew pins like a porcupine.

"Shit," I eloquently grunted, and threw myself to the ground.

A storm of arrows burst out and flew in every direction. At least five hit my plate, and if I hadn't gone down would have gone straight through the aketon into my flesh. I rolled to avoid the lightning wheel coming down on my head but that thing was trickier than it looked: when it touched the street a wave of lightning spread from the point of contact and had me convulsing again. This, I thought, was not going according to plan. Because all of this clearly just wasn't enough, stone powder coalesced above me and formed a massive obelisk that... dropped. *Lightning first*, I thought, gritting my teeth. I reached for Winter and frosted shadows formed an envelope around my body. They got burned through as swiftly as I willed them into being, but that bought me just long enough to scrabble out of the way of the

obelisk. It turned to powder immediately, but I had other problems on my hands. I dropped my shield, since in the face of lightning it was just a liability, and grabbed the Countess of Wrathful Skies' wrist when she tried to swing down at me. Steadying my footing, I rotated and threw her right into the trajectory of the arrow that was meant for the back of my neck.

A green shimmer and it was gone, because the bastards weren't going to make it that easy on me. Stone powder formed around me in the shape of a bubble. Containment, huh. At least they were taking me seriously. I released the shadow envelope and backed away, but the powder followed. Their first mistake of the night. He should have readjusted instead. The Countess had landed on her feet and her wheel rose up, gathering ever more lightning. Another arrow flew silently towards my chest, but I wasn't falling for that one twice. My wrist flicked with unearthly precision and I slapped it aside. When the smaller arrows burst out, it was too far for any of them to hit me. *He did not retire that trick. Might be he can't when it's already been loosed.* The stone had caught up to me, by now, and Wrathful Skies had a streak of lightning floating above the wheel that looked like it was going to sting. My opening.

**"Take,"** I said.

The Countess' eyes went wide as I claimed the sorcery above her head, for just one moment wresting it from her control and tossing it straight at the fae lord trying to contain me. Struck him right in the chest with dark satisfaction. I was moving before my most dangerous opponent could react, and the lack of arrow to duck had me surprised until I heard Hakram's hoarse grunt. *Shit.* I didn't have time to spare a look as I avoided stepping stones entirely and leapt straight at the archer. I got a boot in the helmet for it but caught it with my hand even as I began to fall, drawing on Name strength so even from that awkward position I managed to snatch him off his foot and swing him down behind me. Right into the face of the the Countess of Wrathful Skies, as she prepared to run me through. The two of them were smashed to the ground in a pile of sprawling limbs. I thinned my lips, well aware I couldn't afford to use Fall on these two even if it would be a near-guaranteed kill. I needed it for the Duke. Shot a spear of ice at them out of spite and immediately moved towards the lord.

He was back on his feet, in a narrow alley between two houses. The powder formed a wall in front of me but I sped up and went through before it solidified. Hastily he dragged it back to him and shot spears of stone at me, the first at feet height and then rising. Panting, I threw myself into a slide and narrowly went under the bottom stone. I landed in a crouch in front of him and even as his skin turned to stone my sword came up. Straight through the belly. He gasped and I rose as I withdrew the blade,

cutting straight through his neck in the next swing. The head rolled on the floor, and there went the first of my opponents. The walls to my side groaned, and I cursed when I saw the arrows groaning from them. Fuck, could he pull that on *all* wood? Furious at the waste, I dug into Winter and froze both walls before he could get the arrows flying. Another twist of will had the walls collapsing, and even as the houses followed I turned to face the other two remaining. The Countess kept her lightning wheel close, and not powerful enough to be worth stealing. She'd learned. Not that I'd Take it lightly, anyway.

I could get another two uses out of that aspect tonight at most, and every one I used on these was one less I could pull against the Duke.

"Yew," the Countess said. "Travel. She'll target you otherwise."

"I would never," I lied.

The possible count hesitated, but then lay hand on a wooden wall and disappeared. Well, fuck. That was going to be a pain to deal with. There was smoke in the distance where Hakram was fighting the others, and I could hear rhythmic singing in a dialect of Kharsum I was unfamiliar with. If he was well enough to sing, I decided, I could afford to be careful dealing with these two.

"You are Duchess of Moonless Nights in truth," the Countess said. "Reports of your power were greatly understated."

"I'm just putting my whole heart into it, this time," I sharply grinned. "So, have you distracted me long enough for him to line up his shot yet?"

"Why," the fae drily replied. "I would never."

What I'd meant to do was duck the arrow then kick it into the Countess' face to make me an opening. It started going wrong on the first part: while I avoided the arrow by a hair's breadth, it was already growing pins. I had to roll through a window into a house to avoid the storm, and Gods Below was that a mistake. Everything began growing spikes a heartbeat later.

"I have made better tactical decisions in the past," I conceded out loud.

I managed to tear through the door in time to avoid the worst of it, but worst was a relative term when even the bloody door was shooting arrows at me. About six of them stung their way straight into my back, through plate and aketon both. A lot more worryingly, Wrathful Skies was waiting for me in the street with the wheel raised. There wasn't so much sorcery there it would be worth stealing, and that moment of reluctance cost me. A dozen tendrils of lightning struck out and the better part of them

managed to hit me. The *really* dangerous part, I managed to realize even as my body screamed, was that the spell was continuous. The other fae slid out of a wall to my side and nocked an arrow but let it gather green light. Ominous.

**"Take,"** I gasped.

The Countess immediately cut the lightning, but it wasn't her I was going for. For an instant I felt the green light and knew whom it belonged to: the Count of Green Yew. His title spoke to growth and wood, to- pain spiked my thoughts, scattering them. There was no fire in this, but it was still born of Summer. Anathema to what I had become. It had been enough anyway. The power I'd taken disappeared from the bow and I shoved it into the same door that had wounded me. Tendrils of wood rose and caught the lightning, freeing me. A heartbeat later the arrow struck where I would have still been, but I was already moving. The Countess' sword rose to parry my own, but it was only steel at this very moment and in a contest of strength, I trumped her outright. Her blade driven back she began to step back but I caught her throat with my bare hand. Lightning flickered as she called it back from her wheel into her body but it was much, much too late. My fingers clenched and a sickening crack resounded as I snapped her spine and pulped her throat. Before her body had dropped to the floor I was turning to the Count of Green Yew, but he was already gone.

Retreat? It would be hellish to go through this city with the fae popping out of every house to take a shot at us. No, can't be. *Summer doesn't retreat, not like that.* He could, however, have decided to kill Adjutant so the twins would be freed to act against me. Shit. Aside from the fact that if Hakram died I was going to murder every last one of them, from the first fucking regular to the Queen herself, fighting blind like the smoke-using fae must impose was one of the ways I most hated fighting. I'd grown too use to relying on my Name-sharpened senses. There was no time to dawdle. The smoke cloud was easy enough to find, and I legged it towards there. I kept a eye on my surroundings as I did, wary of an ambush, but I had forgotten one fact about fae: they *flew*. Three arrows landed in a triangle around me, and the pins grew a heartbeat later. Heart sinking, I froze them. I'd already used more than I'd wanted to, and I still had one other major draw to deal with before I got to the Duke. At this rate I'd be dead on my feet by the time I got there. On the other hand, at this rate by the end of this all that would be left of the Summer Court was going to be three guys and a graveyard.

Small comfort. The Count of Green Yew was flying half a mile above me and already nocking an arrow. Making my way up there was going to be tricky, against an opponent that specialized in range combat. The first house I chose to use as a stepping stone was collapsed before I even touched it and I had to resist the urge

to flip him the finger. Discarding the fanciness, I created a circle of shadow in the air and leapt atop it. I was going to stab the bastard even if I had to claw my godsdamned way up. The second circle I made, even as I dismissed the first, was torn through by an arrow. I fell back to street level and took a deep breath. That *fucker*. I was going to have to make multiple platforms every time, wasn't I? Drawing the power, I blinked at what I saw above. He *has* to see that, I thought. But the Count shot another arrow at me instead, and even even as I danced away I was laughing.

The lower edge of the trebuchet stone caught him at rib height.

I got a glimpse of red splatter and white bones before it got out of sight, and faintly made note to find out what goblin had made that shot so I could order them promoted. Hells, if I could accomplish that as vicequeen without burning too many bridges I was going to have them made *count*. They'd sure as Hells earned it. It was harder to find Hakram than I'd thought, after, because the smoke had dissipated. I found Adjutant panting and bloodied in a marketplace, his armour black as coal and his face bearing nasty wounds that were going to scar. His dead hand gleamed strangely, at least the parts of it I could see. Most of it had been shoved through the baroness' eye cavity. *Gods*. My second didn't fuck around, when he got serious. He ripped it out in a shower of gore and crouched, almost too exhausted for words.

"Had to use Rampage," he croaked. "Kept Stand. Think they were weak for barons."

I offered him my arm to grasp and helped him to his feet.

"Dipped a little too deep as well," I said. "Hopefully the others were more conservative, otherwise even if we take out the Duke we'll be wiped when the Queen comes through."

"Plan's not to fight her," he said.

"And those always go so well," I drily replied. "You up for a run? We need to catch up to Nauk."

"I'll live," he said. "No inner bleeding. Is it possible to bruise your kidney?"

"I think mine is permanently blue," I said amusedly.

We made our way back to the main path, and only had to stop twice for him to retch. There wasn't a lot of blood in it and Hakram was an orc, so I wasn't overly worried. His people were built resilient, and Named took that to an extreme. That part of the city had already been secured, though the vanguard was long gone. It was the Deoraithe that held it now and they made way for the both of us. Emptying his stomach had put Hakram back on his feet,

more or less, so he was spared the indignity of my holding him up all the way to the front. Nauk found us before we found him. The fae, I saw, had razed a ring of houses around the city wall. There must have been a moat as well, once, because I saw a pit around even the gates that had been burned clean. It was empty now. The Fifteenth had dug in their positions around the edge of the wall, trading sporadic crossbow fire with the fae above. No sign of the Immortals on the walls, which was relief and worry both.

"Cat," Nauk grinned. "Good hunting?"

"We cleaned house in the west," I said. "Can't answer for the rest."

"Whatever you did there, it collapsed their flank," the legate said. "We hold most of that side now. To the east we've got ten thousand holding a neighbourhood near the walls. Deoraithe failed to break through, but they're contained."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And the rest?"

That left ten thousand missing.

"They tried another run at the trebuchets," Nauk said. "We lost another two and half our ballistas, but they were beaten back. Saw them fly behind the walls."

I grimaced. That was a lot more fae in the inner city than I'd wanted to deal with.

"The Immortals?" I prompted.

"We think they hold the castle," the orc said. "To make sure the Queen has foothold when she crosses."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Doesn't matter," I finally said. "We break through now. What time is it?"

"Midnight Bell was an hour ago," Nauk replied.

Then we needed to hurry. Behind the walls would be an even uglier fight.

"Scry Masego," I ordered. "He's to dismiss his last ward and join us for the push."

The legate bared his fangs.

"Wade in their blood, Catherine Foundling," he said.

"Gods, I hope not," I replied. "Hakram spends long enough cleaning my armour as is."

The grin I got was worth the words, considering the casualties his advance must have caught. When I found Adjutant again the Gallowborne were already with him. Tribune Farrier saluted, and promptly handed me a shield. It had, I noted, my very fresh heraldry painted on it.

"Figured you might break your first one," the dark-haired man said.

I thanked him decided not to tell him it was actually fine and that it had just entirely slipped my mind to double back to pick it up. I rolled my shoulder and took a look at the walls. Those might take hours to breach, if we let the trebuchets do the heavy lifting. Even more now that we'd lost over half of them.

"Cluster tight around me," I ordered Farrier. "Shields up. They'll be aiming at us all the way."

"They always do," the Callowan smiled. "And yet, here we are."

I smiled back, though the affection was short-lived. There were a lot of new faces among the men, and I knew exactly why. I took the lead, Hakram at my side and the Gallowborne at my back. The fae on the walls only fired a few arrows at us, though that'd change if they saw we didn't retreat. I closed my eyes and let Winter loose. I took a step, and ice rose. One step after another, a stairway of ice rose in front and then above the gates of Dormer. It was, I knew, wide enough for three hundred men to go up. It was burning through my reserves, cooling my blood. It was also how my armies were going to take the city.

I advanced, and the Fifteenth advanced with me.

## Chapter 42: Plateau

*"Ah, but every palace you destroy has to be rebuilt! You've single-handedly pulled the Empire out of a slump, hahaha. Once again sweet victory is mine."*

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

The sappers strapped the demolition charges against the guildhall's wall and scuttled away as fast as their feet could take them. The moment they'd gotten clear, two apple-sized balls of flame bloomed and struck at the munitions. Stone shattered, though few shards went in our direction – the goblins had long mastered the art of shaping the direction of the blasts. Two dozen regulars charged into the rubble before the dust and smoke cloud had settled, running into stiff fae resistance. This far into Old Dormer they'd started to hole up in the larger



buildings, turning them into strongholds they used to sally out at the Fifteenth when our lines drove past them. My eyes sharpened and I made out the silhouettes in the smoke. Less than thirty, regulars one and all. The few set up on a balustrade were going to be costly to dislodge, but I couldn't afford to stick my nose into every fight. I let the crossbowmen have at them as my legionaries rammed their shield wall into the enemy on the ground floor.

I'd left Hakram behind when we'd taken the walls, and hadn't seen him in the better part of an hour. The fighting there had been brutal, especially with Masego's ward gone, but Nauk's vanguard had punched through and carved us a beachhead on top of the ramparts. It had been grim work after that, driving them back inch by inch until the enemy commander sounded a horn and they retreated into the inner city. The battle for Dormer was being fought on three theatres, now. Ranker and Afolabi held our backs, the Deoraithe infantry had resumed assaulting the fae dug in the east as soon as the siege engines had turned their fire there and now the Fifteenth was spilling into Old Dormer like a flood. The flood, unfortunately, had eventually run into dike. It would have been too much to hope for that the last stiff opposition we'd run into was the Immortals, holed up in their castle.

The most ancient part of Dormer was, I'd come to realize, built around a handful of low hills joining into a larger one. The baronial castle was atop that, overlooking the old city and the port, and just like Whitestone Quarter back in Laure the wealthy estates had clustered around the seat of power in the city. Weren't a lot of high nobles this far south, but there'd been wealthy merchants and those who'd once been landed knights before that status was burned out of the social fabric of Callow. The Fifteenth had overrun most of the lower level of Old Dormer in swift order, save for a few strongholds that were being bloodily taken piecemeal, but it had stopped cold in face of fae lines on two fronts: the port and the lesser hills. The fucking nobles had built walls around their estate, because naturally it wasn't enough to be rich you had to keep the rabble away from your statues and gardens too. Nauk had lost a full company trying the lowest hill, wiped out in a storm of flame faster than they could scream, before pulling back.

The port was crawling with fae, and I'd bet that was where the ten thousand who'd bailed from the second run at the engines had gone. Regulars alone the Fifteenth might have managed to drive into the river, but as it happened the rivers was swinging back. There was a Count in there who had water sorcery, and the prick had been cautious enough so far we hadn't been able to reach him. When I'd gone to lead the charge he'd surrounded the entire port in a wall of water twenty feet high, and while I could have probably forced my way through that I was unwilling to exhaust myself on a second stringer. I'd linked back with the meat of the

Fifteenth under Legate Hune and scribed Masego, diverting him in that direction. It'd take a while for him to get there, though, so I'd gone with Hune's boys to bring down the last few dug-in fae around the port. I watched in silence as the legionaries finished clearing the guildhall, and nodded in approval at the light casualties. Only five dead, and with the mage line close by the wounded would be back on their feet soon enough. *Speaking of the devil*, I thought. A thickly-built Soninke with lieutenant stripes on her shoulder and the light armour of our mage contingent was making her way to me. I turned without needing to be hailed, and discomfort flickered across her face.

"Ma'am," she saluted. "Lord Hierophant had sent word he's near the port, preparing a ritual to make a path through the water."

I rolled my shoulder absent-mindedly.

"Then let's give him a hand," I mused. "Any word from Adjutant or Archer?"

"Last report has Lord Adjutant in pitched battle with a Summer baroness near the hills, ma'am," the mage replied. "Neither the Archer nor the Thief have been in touch."

It'd been over half a day now, I thought. Any longer and I was going to have to get concerned, though worrying for Archer was not unlike worrying for a forest fire at summer peak – it was usually wiser to worry *about* the fire than for it. As for Thief, well, of all the Named I'd come across she had the most splendid survival instinct. If Diabolist ended up breaking the world, Thief would be the last human alive to share it with rats and cockroaches.

"Tell Hune to back up Adjutant with whatever mages she can spare," I frowned, and looked around.

Hard to tell my way around an unfamiliar city, though the massive water wall in the distance was a bit of a hint as to where I should be headed.

"Should I send word to Lord Hierophant you will be reinforcing him, ma'am?" the mage called out as I began to walk away.

"Let it be a surprise," I said. "He loves those."

—

"You know I despise surprises," Masego said, glaring at me.

Impressive, considering he had no eyes. He was getting better at that. I clapped his shoulder, and even being careful nearly sent him tumbling to the ground.

"What happened to your spirit of adventure?" I replied.

"That's a myth," he said disdainfully, slapping away my hand. "Father's dissected several heroes and never found any trace of it."

Ah, Warlock. If I was the kind of girl to pray, I would that I never had to go digging through that man's basement. I had a feeling whatever I'd find there would give the Tower a run for its money in the 'horrors beyond understanding' department.

"It's a metaphor," I said. "I know you don't know what those are, but-"

I grinned at the deeply offended look on his face and barrelled on before he could interject.

"- I just don't have the time to educate you tonight. Your ritual is ready?"

"Yes," he glared.

"Go on, then," I said, vaguely gesturing. "Do the thing."

The water rampart loomed ahead of us, showing no sign of collapsing on its own. It bisected houses in some parts, and the legionaries had checked inside only to find out it had gone straight through stone and wood. I didn't have the heart to ask if any of my men had been in the way when it was made. Runes bloomed around Masego, and it was difficult for me to keep their image in my mind. High Arcana, then. A curtain of transparent power made a tunnel through the water across the length of the street as Hierophant's face creased in concentration. After a moment, he relaxed. Good enough for me.

"It's a figure of speech," he said.

"No idea what you're talking about," I airily replied.

A full cohort was already forming ranks in front of the tunnel and without missing a beat I took the lead. The commanding officer was a hawk-faced Taghreb, and like most my staff would have been too young for his rank in most other legions.

"Captain Fazil, Your Grace," he introduced himself when I glanced at him.

"Keep your ranks tight and your shields up, Captain," I said. "This is going to be a ride."

His lips quirked in that subtle Praesi way denoting polite amusement.

"Well," he said. "Can't be worse than Marchford."

"I hear that," I muttered.

I'd say this for the fae, while they were a pain to deal with at least they weren't godsdamned demons. I was really hoping Diabolist was out of those to call on, but stood ready for bitter disappointment.

"Shouldn't we be *behind* the shields?" Masego said after catching up to me. "That is what they're meant for."

"Chin up, Lord Hierophant," I said. "Make it look like we know what we're doing."

"I thought we knew what we were doing," he said.

He glanced at me worriedly and I whistled loudly.

"Catherine, *tell me we know what we're doing.*"

"FORWARD!" I screamed, unsheathing my sword.

"I could be in my tower," he complained. "My nice, comfortable tower. Fadila never takes me to battles, you know. She makes me tea. She keeps very tidy notes and lets me sleep in."

I didn't bother to suppressed my snort of laughter at that, letting out ring loud and clear. That must have left an impression on the fae awaiting us on the other side of the tunnel, because their line wavered at the sound. I felt the first volley before they let it loose, the blooming of power just out of sight. With trails of flame the arrows filled the tunnel with burning light that reflected eerily in the waters around us. Slow, compared to how they'd felt when I first encountered them. It was easy enough to pass under the curve when I picked up the pace, though most hadn't been aimed at me. The sound of sorcerous shields pinging told me Masego had seen to that, at least for now. I ripped into the frontline like storm, silhouettes flickering one after another as I immersed myself into the reflexes of my Name. One, two, three and what was the point in keeping count? They came and died. The flowed around me, after a while. Made room, and that was when I realized they'd known ranks would do nothing to stop me. I could see the long warehouses of the port in the distance, and atop them fae stood in knots. Spears of Summer flame were being formed, like the ones they used to pound at the siege engines.

If I actually got hit by one of those I wouldn't die, I didn't think, but I wouldn't be getting back up on me feet for a while either. They'd meant, evidently, to draw me in and keep me pinned. Arrows from all sides flew, and I had to conceded that if it'd been just me they might well have caught me with this. I wasn't, though. Alone. Sorcery slithered around me, shining blue, and began to spin blindingly fast. The arrows struck it first, and were drawn into the spin flawlessly. The spears struck one after another and flame filled my field of vision for long

moments – but, in the end, was drawn in as well. The spinning ended abruptly, and a forest of arrows clattered against stone as Masego made his way to my side.

“Reckless,” he chided.

“Kept them busy,” I replied.

I’d bought my legionaries their beachhead, and wasn’t going to hold their hand through the rest of this. The Count had been the problem here, and with Masego backing me we should be putting him down in short order.

“By the river,” Hierophant said. “I believe he’ll be releasing the wall soon.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good thing,” I grimaced.

“The sheer weight of water will crush anything near it,” he noted. “A shame we’ll be otherwise occupied; it would have been interesting to witness. It is quite rare for water sorcery of this scale to be used save by the Ashurans, you know.”

That would have been interesting enough a line to warrant encouragement if we were drinking in a tent, but we had other priorities at the moment. I took the lead and we advanced towards the river. It was different fighting with Masego than it was with Hakram. Hierophant had been with me since my first real campaign, true, but we’d only really began fighting together near the end of the Liesse Rebellion. It was in the months after that we’d developed the technique, and it hadn’t been truly tested yet. Tonight would see to that. The theory was simple: Masego was a fortress, and I was the garrison. Panes of solid light forming a rough sphere around us hung in the air as we moved forward, and I darted out of their protection to clear the way whenever we met opposition. Arrow fire petered out after the first two volleys did nothing to dent our defences and the fae came in close quarters instead. That was my part to deal with. My shield caught the edge of a swinging blade and forced it down, my sword point taking the fae in the throat before I lightly stepped back. Another filled the void before the movement was even finished.

“Clear,” I called out.

The panes flickered out of existence and as I stepped aside Masego finished murmuring an incantation, a burst of howling wind tearing into the mass of fae before us. Doubtful it’d killed anyone, but it *did* buy me room. I sallied out the moment the burst ended, blade high and carving through the fae that tried to plug the gap. Moments later I saw movement in the distance from the corner of my eye and calmly retreated just as Hierophant restored the panes of light, safely behind the walls as the arrows burned harmlessly. It was a slow way forward, but for foes

who'd never faced it before it was very, very hard to deal with. The two of us ploughed through fae lines even as my legion fought in the distance, clearing two streets in a row with only minimal exertion. The dark-skinned mage didn't even look winded. I could feel the bundle of power that was the Summer Count near the water, but frowned when I saw there was a row of back-to-back warehouses in the way. We'd have to go the long way around if we kept to the streets, and that was more time than I cared to give the enemy. Cutting through a fae's wrist and half-stepping back behind the panes, I spun the blade slowly to limber my wrist. There'd been a lot if killing tonight.

"Warehouse to the left," I said. "Burn."

Masego looked at the wooden walls and raised an eyebrow, red runes lighting up around him. The smell of sulphur spread thick in the air and even as the panes broke, a stream of black flame emerging from his hand and turning into a snake with gaping jaws open wide. The construct tore through the warehouse wall, the crates piled behind it, what looked like dried fish hanging from the ceiling and then the second wall before disappearing in a flash. The fae had been ready for us, this time, and arrows flew the moment the shields were gone. I stood vigil, blade scything through the first few in perfect arc and a twist of will flash-freezing the few that hadn't take care of. The panes were back before a fuller volley could be sent and we resumed our advance, going through the still-smouldering shortcut. The moment we saw the inside was empty of fae our pace went brisk, though Masego stilled before we left the warehouse and finally reached the docks.

"Now," he said. "Cat, he's not releasing it. He's repurposing it. Hid the intent from me by delaying 'til the last moment."

"He's going to smash us with it," I sighed.

I broke at a run immediately and the overweight mage followed as best he could. The Count stood at the edge of the docks, alone, and I thanked any Gods listening for the fae pathological need for melodramatic scenes. If he'd had an honour guard of Summer soldiers this would have been a lot harder. Turning too-large deep blue eyes on us, the fae smiled gently.

"Welcome, Duchess of Moonless Nights," he said. "Allow me to-"

By the time he'd gotten to the word 'Nights', I had the sharper out of my satchel and lit. The toss was a beautiful arc that would have the explosion happen right in his monologuing face. A tendril of water snaked out of the river and caught it before, though, the munitions never detonating.

"This is-" the Count began.

"I'll handle the water," Hierophant interrupted, tone interested as he looked behind us.

"Would you-"

"I've got him," I replied, and charged with my shield angled up.

The first tendril of water was caught on it and ricocheted upwards. I smoothly spun around the second and leapt over the third, landing in a roll at his feet. His hand whipped forward and there was a gargantuan groan but the distinct lack of downing that followed meant Hierophant was good as his word. My shield caught him on the shoulder and I felt bones break. He didn't even try to fight the impact, allowing it to throw him into the river. He landed on his feet, never actually going through.

"And now-"

I followed, letting Winter flare under my feet. It froze the water on touch just long enough for me to be able to make it from one stride to the next. I was on his chosen grounds now, though, and it showed. Instead of the handful of tendrils I got a full three dozen, coming in a flawless circle. Couldn't afford to slow down or I'd sink, so I'd have to time this *just* right. I picked the highest tendril and froze a smooth shard of it, then leapt atop the attack meant to kill me. Immediately the others adjusted course towards me, but while his sorcery was versatile it was too slow. I wasn't surprised Princess Sulia hadn't taken him to the Battle of Four Armies and One, the Winter fae would have eaten this one alive. My sword came down as I fell atop him, cutting straight through his shoulder and the pale blue mail that covered it. The Count screamed and before I could response I was thrown away by a waterspout, the back of my plate dragging along the length of the docks and ripping through the planks. Fuck, that hurt. I'd cut off the arrows the Count of Green Yew had shot in there, but there were still bits inside and they'd wiggled horridly into my back muscles. I got back on my feet slowly, keeping a sliver of attention on the presence in the back of my head. The fae was in the air, now, red and gold wings keeping him aloft.

"*Finally*," he hissed. "This is absurd. You have no respect for the proper courtesies, child. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"One day," I replied, "you guys are going to stop falling for this one."

Zombie the Third ploughed into him from the back, screeching loudly as his wings flapped and the hooves smashed into shoulder blades. My mounts must have weighed twice as much as he did, and fae or not that took a toll. The Count plunged into the docks headfirst with a broken back, and much to my amusement got stuck

between the planks I'd already ripped. I didn't waste time on anything fancy and just punched through the back of his neck with the tip of my sword.

"Godsdamnit, Catherine," Masego moaned.

Oh right, he still had all that water to deal with. I guided Zombie into landing at my side and dragged the Count's broken body off of the docks just in case leaving it close to river would heal it somehow. You never knew with fae. Hierophant's arms were held up and shaking as he dealt with what looked like a small lake of levitating water. That was a *lot* bigger than I'd thought it would be. I, uh, left him to that. It looked under control. He eventually managed to make an escapement that slowly emptied the water back into the Wasaliti, though he was panting by the end of it. I patted Zombie's back.

"Who's a good abomination to the laws of men and decency," I praised it. "You are."

It preened, blue eyes glittering.

"Are you indulging yourself?" Hierophant said, sounding like he was rolling his eyes.

No there was an image, but I didn't linger on it because I stood frozen.

"I, uh, didn't make him do that," I admitted quietly.

"Her," Masego corrected.

"How do you – never mind, I don't want to know," I muttered. "They don't usually do that."

"Your necromancy has grown different than Uncle Amadeus'," the blind mage mused. "That has interesting implications."

"This," I decided, "feels like an issue for Tomorrow Catherine to deal with. She'll bitch about it, no doubt, but *she* hasn't had to kill her way through a fucking army of murderous fairies so screw her and her whining mouth."

"Usually when villains started referring to themselves like this, it is before they go deeply and irrevocably mad," Masego informed me. "It is a well-documented phenomenon."

I could always count on this one for reassurances, couldn't I? I was picking my particular shade of scathing sarcasm when movement above stilled my tongue. To call what was happening there flying would have been somewhat generous, I decided. It was, if anything, falling at a slightly forward angle. I imagined the fae's ability to flap its wings was somewhat affected by the fact that Archer had sunk two knives in its back and was trying to



guide it with them. By their angle, they'd come from the castle. That was good. The way the fae died in mid-flight was slightly less so. Archer's lips moved in what was no doubt a vicious curse and she jumped after retrieving her knives, spreading her arms wide.

"She's aiming for us, I think," Masego said, frowning.

"Going to hit that warehouse instead," I noted. "Her ride died too early."

We began to stroll towards the likely end of her trajectory when Hierophant suddenly smacked a fist into a palm.

"I could ease her way down, like I did with you," he offered.

He had, huh. I gauged Archer's fall. Nowhere as bad as mine would have been, though she'd bruise for sure. And if I remembered correctly, after catching me the wench had *dropped* me.

"Nah," I smiled. "I'm sure she has it under control."

Twenty heartbeats later Archer crashed through a thatched roof in an explosion of straw and wood. Masego and I casually walked into the warehouse and found her lying sprawled on broken crates full of salmon. She moaned.

"You didn't catch me," she accused.

"My hands were full," I said.

"You could have sent your horse," she bit out.

"It's a sensitive soul," I defended. "Didn't want to risk hurting it."

"Ugh," she groaned. "You two are the worst."

I looked around and found no sight of her expected shadow.

"Where's Thief?" I asked.

"Last I saw her she was telling me I was a horrid idiot who didn't understand the meaning of stealth and that I deserved to die," Archer mused. "She was smiling when she said it, though. I think she's warming up to me."

I coughed to hide my laugh.

"I'm sure she is," I lied. "How much did you get done?"

"Right, report," Archer breathed, vaguely flapping a wrist at me instead of rising. "So, we stole a bunch of banners and planted the goblinfire but then we ran into these guys. So Thief was all

like 'Archer, you peerless beauty whose approval I secretly crave-"

"Sounds just like her," I said flatly.

"- we should run'. But then this guy was all like 'Yeah, you better run'. So, you know, I shot him in the eye. And I'm going to be honest with you here, Catherine, they didn't take well to that. *At all.*"

"You don't say," I murmured.

So that was why Black never took my reports unless he had a bottle of wine at hand.

"So anyways this other guy comes in and he's all 'I am a Duke, the Queen is going to kill you all', you know the usual stuff. So I tried to stab him but he threw me through a window and then set fire to the stables I landed in. Now," Archer firmly stated, "I could have taken him."

"Of course," I agreed, without the faintest hint of irony.

"But I know how worried you get and I'm a good friend, so I came back instead. Grabbed some fae, stabbed it to get its attention and now here I am."

She flapped her hand again.

"Report over," she cheerfully told me.

I ripped a salmon from its hook and threw at her head, ignoring the loud protests about respect due to those wounded in the line of duty.

"Masego," I said. "Please heal this idiot, then scry Hune's staff. Adjutant is to drop whatever he's doing and wait for us at the frontlines. It's time to end this."

The fae, I learned when he got in touch with Hune, apparently thought the same: the Immortals had come out.

It went downhill from there.

## **Chapter 43: Cliff**

*"Of course not, did you see the height of that drop? That is the last we've seen of the Shining Prince, I assure you."*

– Dread Empress Sinistra IV, the Erroneous

Historically speaking, villains leading assaults against a numerically inferior force situated atop a hill did not lead to the kind of outcome I would prefer. That was a problem. On the

other hand, if I didn't lead an assault against those hills Summer would still have a decent chunk of its army left when the Queen arrived. That would be a *much* bigger problem. On the other hand, if I ended up with most my armies dead by the time we got a royal visit I would be fucked regardless. The Queen wouldn't negotiate with a host on its last gasps, even if hers was wrecked. It would also give a lot of power to my 'allies' in Arcadia I'd rather they didn't have, given that they were literally incapable of not being treacherous. Kind of like High Lords, really, only they were less smug about it.

"This is a dilemma," I noted, squinting ahead.

The Immortals had come out to play. Pouring out of the castle on shining wings, they'd propped up the regulars holding the ring of walled properties around it and by the sound of the horns that were now blaring they were about to begin a counterattack. I'd pit the Fifteenth against regulars any day, especially if we had dug in positions, but the golden fae were another story. By my reckoning, they were physically on par with what I'd been able to do when I'd still been fresh to my Name. There were, unfortunately, ten thousand of them. No, I corrected silently. Less than that. Both Masego and I must have taken out a chunk of their numbers in Arcadia and I could hardly believe they'd scythed through both Nauk's men and fought of the Watch simultaneously without taking some losses of their own. *Let's be generous*, I thought, and *assume nine thousand are left*. That felt a lot like saying it wasn't as bad to have a sword tearing into your lung rather than entirely through.

"We can't retreat," Hakram said.

Brawling with another titled noble fae had not done wonders for Adjutant, it was plain to see. He had a nasty cut across his cheek that was going to scar even after healing magic had been poured into it and he had a black eye already turning dark green. The fact that the pauldron on his armour was loose hadn't escaped my notice either. That likely meant his opponent had dislocated his shoulder so hard it had ripped out the steel bands. For all that, he was standing and steady. Couldn't ask more of him. His words only sunk in a moment later. He wasn't wrong, not exactly. If the Fifteenth gave ground now we were abandoning fortified positions in favour of a street fight with opponents that could fly. They were a lot better at skirmishing than we were, I had to admit. On the other hand, I'd put my hand to fire that after the first wave of regulars softening us up the second would be Immortals. Those would tear through walls like wet parchment.

"Masego," I said. "Scry me Juniper."

I'd gathered most of the Woe on a flat rooftop before we went on the offensive, in part to catch our breath and in part to try to find a weak point for us to break through. Masego had also taken

the time to dig the arrows out of my back and heal the wounds, prompting the inevitable jokes about having been stuck with fae wood by Archer. It'd taken long to get everyone there, to my dismay. We must be past First Bell by now, and if the presence of so many fae hadn't warped the passing of time too much that meant we had only about two hours until dawn. At this time of the year, two hours before Morning Bell was when the sun started peeking through. Hierophant no longer needed his trinkets to scry, I saw. He drew a circle in the air that shimmered like water and heartbeats later one of the mages attached to Juniper's headquarters appeared on the other side. My general shouldered him aside before long, her face looking comically large in the circle.

"Catherine," she said. "What went wrong?"

If the situation was slightly less dire I would have made something of that, but I didn't have the time to spare. The fae were mobilizing.

"Immortals reinforced the outer ranks," I said. "They're preparing for a push, if I'm not mistaken."

The request for advice went unsaid, but she heard it anyway. The orc grunted in displeasure at the news.

"Begin Operation Candlelight immediately," she said. "And hit the walls before they sally. If we don't keep up the pressure we lose Old Dormer."

I grimaced. We both knew that would mean brutal casualties for the Fifteenth. I'd known this was not going to be a clean battle or an easy one, but sending so many of my men to die still left a bad taste in the mouth.

"What's the situation on the other fronts?" I asked.

"Deoraithe are getting fucked to the east," she bluntly said. "Fae drew them in and set the entire sector on fire. General Afolabi had scattered the host at our back, but they're still harassing. There'll be no reinforcements from the Twelfth or the Fourth."

"Shit," I said. "Kegan tried to send in the Watch, didn't she?"

"Had to threaten putting her in chains to shut that down," Juniper growled. "They're already headed your way, not that she's happy about it."

The Duchess of Daoine had always been the largest liability in this. There'd been a risk she'd scrap the entire operational plan if she thought she was losing too many men. We'd made a deal for her to help me with the fae in exchange for a crossing and

backing against Diabolist, but she'd always put the interests of the Deoraithe above everything else. I had a feeling Juniper's threat had been a lot more colourful than just chains, and I was glad she'd lost her temper. If Kegan started acting out the delicate balancing act that was this battle could very well collapse on our heads.

"See you on the other side, Hellhound," I said.

"Don't die an idiot, Foundling," she dismissed, and the scrying link died.

"She's growing on me, I'll admit," Archer noted.

"You say that about everyone that insults me," I sighed.

"Hakram?"

"I'll get this started," the orc replied.

I let him leave without comments. It was Legate Hune that had the scrying connections to Robber and his cohort of miscreants, though the orders about resuming the offensive would have to be carried to Nauk as well.

"So, candlelight. Are we romancing the fae now? Bold move," Archer mused.

"We're going to burn them out," I said. "Assaulting the castle was always going to be bloody as all Hells, so we planned to hem them in with goblinfire."

"Doesn't that burn uncontrollably?" Archer said.

"It can be delayed with ditches," Masego noted.

"Ditches dug through pavestone?" the woman mocked.

"It does," I broke in before that could degenerate further.

"It'll be a race for us to break through the front before we're neck-deep in green death as well. To be honest I'd rather burn them out entirely, but Hierophant says we need to hold the beachhead to contain the Queen."

"Summer has prepared a crossing point," the mage said. "She'll still be able to cross without it, if after a delay, but then we would not know where. That complicates warding a great deal."

Archer cleared her throat.

"So, just to be sure, the plan is to set fire to a castle and then charge into it?" she said.

"That's oversimplifying a lot," I protested. "There are nuances."

"Your general's going to be pissed you disobeyed," she grinned.

Yeah, that battle was already lost. Better get out with as much dignity as I could manage. I strode to the edge of the roof and sharpened my vision. Hakram had waste no time, I saw. The Fifteenth was already forming ranks for the assault and moments later green bloomed in the distance. Then again. To the left and the right of the castle. There would be another foyer behind it, I knew, though the ramparts hid it away from me.

"All right, we move," I said. "We've got until dawn to kill us a duke."

—

At this point I wasn't holding a shield so much as an arrowcatch that occasionally got set on fire. I wiggled my fingers around the latest arrowhead, that had come a little too close to comfort to carving straight through my thumb. Goblin steel didn't do much to block those when there was that much sorcery behind them.

"Hierophant, if I become a godsdamned porcupine because you're being a perfectionist I will be *cross*," I snarled.

Archer, standing behind Hakram and the tower shield he'd claimed for the assault, put an arrow in the eye of the enterprising fae who'd come so close to lowering my amount of fingers. She was a vision, it had to be said. Movements perfectly smooth and fluid, she let loose a shot with every breath and I had yet to glimpse her fail to make a kill. She was clearing out the walls wherever she aimed as swiftly as the fae filled the gaps, quicker on the draw than even Pickler's repeating scoprions had been. Adjutant wasn't doing nearly as well, a dozen arrows stuck in his shield and one gone through his boot. Which he'd had to stomp around to put out the flames that had immediately spread, something I would have enjoyed watching if I wasn't busy standing around like Creation's angriest practice dummy.

"This is complicated work," Hierophant said.

"Gods Below, just burn our way through," I yelled.

The Soninke needed to hurry the Hells up. Around us the Fifteenth was assaulting the walls with ladders, and dying in droves as they did. It wasn't that the ramparts were difficult. They were garden walls, more or less. But the fae had gathered archers behind them and were shooting massed volleys down on my legionaries. Half the ladders had gone up in flames before touching the walls and the fae on them were fighting furiously to keep us from establishing a beachhead. *And these are the fucking regulars*, I thought. *The Immortals withdrew deeper in.* The broad avenue that led straight to the castle passed through a fortified gate that Summer had closed and would laugh in the face of a ram:

it had a heavy steel portcullis in front of it, protected by thick arches of stone. We'd need sorcery to punch through that, but Masego was dithering like a bloody milkmaid.

"Ah," Hierophant sighed. "Disappear."

I raised my shield to catch another arrow that would have taken him in the throat, glancing over the side. A wave of darkness had engulfed the gate and the rampart bordering it, solidifying for a moment before it disappeared. It left behind absolutely nothing. No stone, no wood, no steel. It was as if nothing had ever existed there at all. Gods. Had he annihilated everything? No, I could feel something at the edge of my senses that was not unlike Arcadia. He'd shunted the entire gate off in another dimension.

"FIFTEENTH," Nauk's voice roared from behind me. "TIGHTEN RANKS, YOU UGLY GRASS-LICKERS. FORWARD!"

The answering shout was deafening, thousands yelling and steel brought up. Woven inside, though, I could hear the soft buzz of arrows that still fell like rain.

"Into the breach," I shouted at the rest of the Woe, barely audible over the pandemonium.

Hakram moved to cover my left and Masego hunkered up behind us, runes of light blooming with but a gesture. Archer put one last arrow through a fae's open mouth before joining up and together we advanced. Our way through the absent gate was uncontested, but in the walled avenue it led into ranks of fae were awaiting us. Black had once compared leading Named into battle to leading a chorus, and as we struck I finally understood why. We were, as a group, greater than the sum of our individual skills. The grooves were already there for us to settle into, as if they'd been carved before we even begun. Archer opened the song. She did not waste her arrows on the rank and file, instead surgically putting down any fae that looked like an officer. Even as we tread the pavestones, they dropped with every heartbeat. Hierophant added his voice to the melody, whispers in the mage-tongue weaving rings of darkness in the fae ranks that bloomed and tore through mail and flesh. The chaos was our cue. Adjutant and I dug into it with relish, a storm of steel and strength that shattered and broke the straw men standing in our way.

My blood sang with the song, the heat of it something not even Winter could deny me. With every stroke and every stride we painted death across the face of Summer, Archer's long knives joining us in the steps without missing a beat. I could feel it without ever laying eyes on it, the swing of Adjutant's axe I could duck under to overextend a screaming soldier and carve through his throat with a flick of the wrist. Hierophant's sorcery flashed across the melee like coils of ruin, passing so close I could feel the caress of the power unleashed without it

ever touching me. I could not tell the passing of time, every sight flowing into the other by what could have been an hour or a heartbeat. I felt myself grinning, teeth bared as Summer gave. Fae let themselves die on my blade merely to slow it, others striking in that instant of killing but what did I care? I was not one blade but many, my body just a vessel for my will. Dust swallowed the dead man whole, the edge of the axe dug into the chest of the thing that would have slain me even as I spun and slit the throat of the fae to my side with inhuman precision. Not a drop of exertion wasted, as if slaughter could be measured and quantified.

The four of us stood surrounded by a field of corpses when I returned to myself, not a single living fae in sight. I was panting, though instead of exhaustion I felt invigorated. This, I thought, had been deeper a religious experience than anything I'd ever felt in any House of Light. The sensation ebbed and the absence of it was hollow. Sound returned, the fighting of legionaries behind us and the slow breathing of the Woe around me.

"Shit," Archer croaked softly. "That was... *Fuck.*"

Hierophants' eyes were bright, though his mind faraway. Adjutant looked oddly serene, shield resting on his shoulder as he leaned on the haft of his long axe.

"Yeah," I muttered, and speaking at all felt like I was whistling in a graveyard.

I shook myself out of it before long, and assessed our situation. Making a unified push into the upper city had always been a fantasy, I knew. There were avenues up here, made broad for carriages, but aside from the path that led straight up to the castle the rest was a maze writ by the whims of the powerful who'd once lived here. The Fifteenth had taken the outer walls as we'd been killing what I now grasped had been the reinforcements meant to drive my legionaries back. Now the knife fight began, my men having to spread through dozens of gardens and manors as Summer fought them for every inch.

"Castle's where we need to be," I said, pointing my sword at the faraway silhouette of the tall towers.

I could glimpse spreading green in the distance, a reminder that the fae were not the only enemy we had to beat. The goblinfire had made certain they would not be able to flank us, that they would be forced to fight us in a narrow corridor, but with every hour that corridor became narrower for us as well. Resistance would become harsher the deeper we went in. Archer wiped her longknives on the cloak of a decapitated soldier before sheathing them, running her tongue against her lips. My eyes could not help but linger on the sight as I wondered what kissing her would feel



like, and peeling that leather off her. Shit, fighting didn't usually get my blood up this way. It had just felt... intimate, more than killing ever should. I looked away before she could notice. Nauk came to the rescue, thank the Gods, leading up a cohort of legionaries with the Gallowborne at their head. The large orc whistled at the sight of the corpses strewn around us, Tribune Farrier coming to stand at his side.

"Not that looks like it was a proper fucking fight," the legate said. "See that, you wretched layabouts? That's the kind of work I expect from you."

There were a few barks of laughter.

"Legate, Tribune," I greeted, sheathing my sword as I took in the sight the two.

Nauk was grinning and splattered in blood. He'd been leading from the front again. Farrier's mail was scorched on the side, but aside from that he was in good health.

"We're making a push to the castle," I said. "I take it this is our reinforcements?"

"Hune's bastards are handling the flanks," Nauk replied. "Scraped up my only intact cohort and brought your reds and gold along to spice the wine."

"Your Grace," John Farrier said, offering a nod that bordered on a bow.

"Catherine," I sighed.

He'd become irritatingly formal since it had been made open knowledge I'd been named Vicequeen of Callow. It had taken me the better part of a year to wean him off that the first time, and I wasn't looking forward to fighting that war again.

"Keep your eyes open, boys and girls," I called out. "We've got their second line ahead and the Immortals behind that. You're in for a rough night."

"Hells, ain't that every night in this outfit?" someone called out from the ranks.

"Wouldn't be the Fifteenth if we didn't get proper fucked before sunup," someone else laughed.

Well, they weren't *wrong*.

"Gallowborne take the lead," I told Farrier. "If we run into the Duke, you run."

"Ma'am," the dark-haired man protested. "We're--"

"Ants, to a thing that powerful," I flatly said. "You have your orders."

He nodded, though he didn't seem pleased about it. Nauk was eyeing him approvingly. Loyalty didn't really count for orcs unless you were willing to die for it.

"We done braiding our hair?" Archer drawled. "I'm getting bored."

"There's nothing wrong with braids," Hierophant muttered, putting his own braids in order.

I wisely decided not to touch that and instead gestured for Nauk to call the march. It would have been much harder, I thought, without Archer. We were ambushed from rooftops twice on our way forwards, but between her bow and the line of sappers that was distressingly eager to wreck noble houses given half an excuse we weren't given a serious challenge. That was when I started to get worried. We should have, by now, run into either a barricade or another heavy knot of fae. I let my stride lapse.

"Something's wrong," I said.

Hakram nodded.

"I am no tactician," Masego said, "but it seems poor planning to allow your enemy to gain foothold on your walls. We might have simply spent the strength of Summer, Catherine. They might no longer have nobles to field against us."

I shook my head.

"Remember how many people there were, at the masquerade in Skade?" I said. "Summer should have at least that many."

"Duke hasn't come out, either," Archer frowned. "He didn't seem this shy when we tangled."

I closed my eyes and considered the battle as if I were not part of it. The front in the plains was effectively over, by Juniper's report. The fighting in the east had turned brutal, but given the numbers Duchess Kegan could field it was highly unlikely the fae there had turned the tide. Unless they had flown away, as they'd allegedly done earlier. *No, they can't do that quietly. Either one of us would have seen a few thousand glowing wings in the sky or Juniper would have scried Hune with a warning.* The forces left in play, then were the remaining regulars in the upper city and the Immortals. *And the Duke, followed by whatever nobles he's got left.* If I was a Duke of Summer, needing to keep a fortress at all costs and three of sides around it already on fire, what would I do? Immortals would be my sharpest knife, so I couldn't waste them on attrition. So I'd put the regulars on the wall and send the nobles to bolster them.

*No, he can't do that. He already sent out three Counts and a handful of solid barons and we just tore through them in less than an hour. Sending nobles against the Woe would be trying to put out a bonfire with oil. Named couldn't advance alone, though, or at least not do so and expect to hold any grounds they took. Which he must suspect we needed to, with how hard we'd been going after the castle. So what he's aiming for is the soldiers. Then why not push harder to hold the walls? Why hadn't we had a rougher fight going in? I mind mind, I watched the Fifteenth die in droves to enter the upper city and then take the fight to the maze of walled and sprawling domains, harassed by a much more mobile enemy every step of the way. But giving ground. Juniper had said, earlier, that the fae to the east had drawn in the Deoraithe before setting fire to the city. They're doing the exact same thing here, I realized. Only they won't burn their own fortifications, they need those to scatter the legionaries. Once they reel us in...* In a line across the upper city, golden banners rose high in the sky.

In utter silence, the Immortals advanced.

## Chapter 44: Drop

*"The only thing more dangerous than being hated by a villain is to be loved by them."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

That made it twice, that the Summer Court manoeuvred me into a situation where there was absolutely nothing I could do. The golden banners flew high, and with every moment they remained there my legionaries would be dying. In tight ranks, with sappers and crossbowmen at their backs, heavies might have a chance against the Immortals. But dispersed across a dozen different mansions, spread out in pursuit? It would be slaughter. And for once, we would be on the wrong side of it. A part of me already grieved the death of those soldiers, though I knew that even greater caution would have made no great difference. If I'd grasped the enemy's intent here, Juniper likely had an hour ago – and she'd still sent us in, because this battle was against dawn as much as against the fae. Another quieter, calmer part of me was already tallying how many losses the Fifteenth would incur and assessing whether it would cripple us before the fight against Diabolist.

I didn't always like the woman I'd become. It was a damningly short walk from *we need this whatever the cost* to *one sin, one grace*. That my shade of ruthlessness was different from Black's was cold comfort. It sometimes occurred to me, in the dark of night, that if I got my and settled Callow I'd be the last monster remaining in it. It was an unsettling thought but remembering the girl I'd once been, the one who'd once thought

that there was no need for monsters at all, brought as much disgust as it did rue. Keeping my hands clean clean wasn't going to stop armies marching, or fields unburnt. It wasn't going to do a single fucking thing except make myself feel more righteous. And still, once in a while, I couldn't help but wonder what it would have felt like to be proud of the tired woman that looked back when I stood before a mirror. I clenched my fingers and let out a long breath. Whining about the price I'd had to pay to get a seat at the table wasn't going to change anything.

Blood had been spilled, there was a foe ahead of me. They would break or I would, it was as simple as that.

"Combat formations," Nauk barked. "Time to earn your *ghelsin'in* pay, children."

Kharsum, that. Meant fuck, basically, though with the implication of going at it from behind. Wonderful language, Kharsum. Had more variations on 'fuck' and 'eat' than any other tongue I'd come across, which honestly said quite a bit about them as a people. There were no Immortals in sight yet, but a banner had risen ahead. Only a matter of time.

"Catherine," Adjutant said, coming to stand at my side. "We knew it'd be bloody. This changes nothing."

"Think about the tactic, Hakram," I said. "This isn't jaws clamping on our fingers, we lose a thumb and it's over. They'll drive us back to the walls, then the Immortals will retreat and the regulars fill the gap again. They're going to *harvest* us, one push at a time."

"That sounds bad," Archer whispered at Masego. "You've been in wars before, Zeze. This is bad, right?"

"Don't call me that, you horrid sweaty goblin. And she's Callowan," Hierophant whispered back. "They love farming, do it all over the country. It could be good."

"It's bad, Zeze," I sighed, ignoring Archer's delighted chortle. "The Duke of Green Orchards, if it's really him in charge, essentially turned the outskirts of this place into a meat grinder for the Fifteenth."

"What's the blades, in this tortured metaphor?" Archer asked.

"The Immortals," I replied.

"So we kill the Immortals," Archer mused. "There, problem solved."

"It does seem a fairly straightforward issue," Masego agreed.

Though I had some truly cutting sarcasm to grace them with, I held my tongue. Archer was, well, right might be a bit of a stretch and I definitely wasn't giving her the satisfaction of saying anything like that but there was a nugget of correctness hidden in that boulder of aggressive ignorance. To pull this off, the Duke would have to spread the Immortals in a thin line across the upper city. And if we broke through that, he was in trouble. The castle would be wide open, save possibly for him and a handful of other nobles. That meant either betting this battle on him crushing us, which was risky for him given our highly murderous track record against Summer, or pulling back the Immortals to get in our way. The Woe could, in my opinion, feasibly deal with either the Immortals or the Duke. Both would be beyond us.

"We punch through and he's on the backfoot," I said to Hakram.

"Even if all we manage is to keep the centre from collapsing," the orc replied, "it's a rallying point for the Fifteenth and a funnel for reinforcements. It would turn into a match of attrition he cannot afford."

Neither could we, we were both aware, but what other options did we have?

"Nauk," I called out.

"Warlord," he grinned. "We got a plan?"

"Smash through everything until we've won," I said honestly.

"Ah, the Foundling gambit," he gravelled. "It's never failed us before."

"Don't say that where people can hear, and that's an order," I hurriedly replied.

That kind of stuff had a way of spreading. Legion humour was, uh, more than a little dark. Four hundred men already standing in tight ranks across the breadth of the avenue began their advance after a few yells. The Woe took the lead and I sharpened my senses to watch for the likely ambush that awaited further down the road. Though darkness was hardly bar to my sight, the smoke that was spreading across the sky was. Balls of magelight hovered above the two cohorts, kept going by our mages, but I barely noticed them: what was most visible in my eyes was the bevy of standards in the sky. Which was why, when one disappeared, I immediately noticed. *Far left*, I thought. Hadn't seen much of what was there, though I'd noticed trees from a distance. Had my legionaries managed to turn back the – ah, Thief was still on the prowl. And aiming to complete her collection, by the looks of it.

"Archer," I said. "How many of the standards did you two manage to take?"

"Half, maybe?" she shrugged. "After the first few they noticed and we had to be more careful, but there couldn't have been more than twenty in all."

And I was currently looking at eight still giving off that golden hue. Thief might not have been much of a fighter, but she was far from useless. I abandoned the train of thought without lingering, as moments later we'd finally come across the enemy. Ahead of us was a roundabout, though a fancier one than any I'd ever seen in Laure. It was wide as a plaza, the avenues circling the statue garden in the centre wide enough for two carriages to share it. Among the alabaster statues of what looked like past rulers of Dormer and a noticeably larger depiction of Eleanor Fairfax – though the sculptor had taken liberties there, since I doubted a knight of her calibre would have ever worn armour that left so much of her tits out in the open – the Immortals had formed a textbook perfect square. Even simply standing around, they were wrecking the greenery of the garden: the trees that weren't already outright on fire were all smouldering, and the grass looked like a mage training yard. The Summer Court's elite had not changed since I'd last seen them. Gold plate set with rubies glimmered under closed armet helmets of the same, heater shields so well-polished they could serve as mirrors filling one hand and ivory halberds the the other. Facing them, my legionaries spread across the roundabout. The Gallowborne took the centre, Nauk's cohort split to cover the flanks.

"Summer Triumphant," an Immortal from the front ranks called out.

Two hundred halberds slammed down in perfect unison, flickers of flame spreading from where they touched the ground. The words had not been spoken in any language I knew, and hardly been words at all. They'd been the crackle of wildfires, the clash of steel and the spilling of blood on hungry earth. *Summer's the season of war*, Archer had once told me. Their words rang of that truth, a boast that rattled the night air.

"KILL THEM," Nauk screamed.

"TAKE THEIR STUFF," the Fifteenth screamed back.

We charged, wings enveloping their flanks as smoothly as if this was a practice battle. *Like sea against rocks*, I thought. The halberds rose, the halberds fell, and there went the first rank of my legionaries. As streaks of lightning filled the air and sharpeners were thrown in long arcs, Adjutant and I rammed into the enemy. It was not like fighting the regulars. They did not give, when my sword struck their shields. And there was no slapping aside a strike of those halberds. No match for me in strength, perhaps, but not that far either. *No wonder they broke the Sword*

*of Waning Day, when they fought.* Winter's sharpest blades were rusty knives compared to these. Hacking my way into their formation was like taking an axe to an oak. My first blow hit a shield without purchase and bounced off, the halberd taller than I was sweeping down to tear through my shoulder in answer. I had to stick close to the Immortal to avoid it, and doing that felt like rolling around in a pile of embers. They heat they gave out wouldn't melt my plate, maybe, but it would heat it until it scalded to the touch given long enough.

It took Adjutant and I working together to pry the line open. His shield got a halberd stuck and the tip of my sword pierced just over the tip of the enemy's, sliding into the opening between the helmet and the gorget. The blood that coated my blade when it withdrew was smoking, but the fae was dead. I kicked the enemy down and forced my way into the gap even as the Immortal behind that one advanced, trying to force me back with his shield. From the corner of my eye I saw Adjutant's knees give as the shaft of a halberd struck his shoulder and that distraction cost me. The side of my shield caught the halberd's point at the very last moment, hard enough to change the angle from my chest to my forearm. The ivory went through plate and I screamed as fire burned in my veins. I would have had to give ground, if Archer hadn't come to back me. Slithering around my shield she struck high, plunging a longknife in the Immortal's throat and spinning to throw herself at the man at his side. I ripped out the halberd the corpse still clutched and let Winter loose, the flame smothered by impossibly deep cold. I let the strength linger, and took full advantage of the room she'd carved me.

The Immortals were meant to fight in ranks, the enemy in front, and from the side they struggled. Not the most flexible of weapons, halberds. I slammed my shield in the flank of the Immortal to my left and when he turned snarling Adjutant's axe smashed through his helm and splattered blood. Now that my second was at my side, we began to widen the gap. One of us baited, the other struck. I learned at the cost of what was going to be a nasty scar under my eye that anything but a killing blow was useless on them – they did not seem to feel pain, and baldly ignored wounds. Being on the other side of that was a lot more infuriating than I'd thought it would be. With Archer weaving in and out of our side, knives always moving, we forged a wedge of corpses in the centre of the formation that the Gallowborne filled without prompting. The rest of my legionaries were not doing nearly as well, I saw when I got a rare moment of respite. Hierophant had seen the flanks were failing badly in the face of the opposition and lent them a hand, but the two spells he was working simultaneously took up all of his concentration. A hovering ball of shadow had sprouted tendrils that struck like sledgehammers on the left, while to the right a panoply of small silver circles flew around and shot beams of pale sorcery that

not even the shields of the Immortals could withstand without twisting.

We'd killed maybe a fourth of them, fighting tooth and nail for every corpse, and already taken over twice that in casualties. I grit my teeth and pressed on. Attrition would grow more to our advantage the fewer of them were left, and though only the wrecks of two cohorts would emerge from this fight we would emerge victorious nonetheless.

"Sons and daughters of Summer, stand deathless under the sun," a voice thundered.

Oh shit. Did that mean what I think it meant? Behind me, the dead Immortals proved the truth of the name. Great gouts of Summer flame poured out of the wounds, and they rose to their feet – most of them in the middle of the Gallowborne. A dozen of my retinue died in the first heartbeat and I screamed in fury.

"HIEROPHANT," I yelled. "KILL THAT STANDARD."

Before I'd even finished speaking a handful of runes formed just before my eyes, shining blue, and transmuted into a word: warded. Fuck. We weren't the only ones who could use those.

"BATTER IT DOWN," I screamed.

We were way past conserving power for the Duke of Green Orchards. At this rate we'd never even reach him. The detonation that followed rocked the entire plaza, statues flying in pieces and even Immortals being thrown to the ground. I widened my stance and was only blown back a few feet, though Hakram was thrown straight into two legionaries and had to extirpate himself from the mess of limbs and armour. To my horror, when I looked up, a globe golden light shone around the standard as it remained unharmed. Oh, this was bad. I ripped the halberd out of the grasp of an Immortal swinging at me, dropping my shield, and swung it around so that the edge of the blade tore into his skull. He dropped dead like a stingless puppet, but how long would he remain like that? The fae might not be able to pull that trick as often in Creation as they could in Arcadia, but how many times would that mean? Four, nine? My legionaries couldn't even afford for it to happen twice. I would have called out to Archer, asked her if she had anything in her quiver that could take care of that, but she was busy trying not to get skewered by a pair of very angry Immortals.

It was a shiver, or at least that was how it felt to see it. It spread from the left flank, slithering through the thick ranks of Immortals and only turning into something real when the silhouette emerged out of thin air. Thief put a foot on a shield meant to smash her down, using it as a foothold to move to the shoulder of another Immortal. The fae tried to shake her off but



she was already moving, jumping off the helm of an Immortal and somersaulting in the air. She went through the golden globe like it wasn't there at all, hand snatching the standard at the apex of her leap and spiriting it away in a heartbeat. I felt the impact before she'd even begun to come down, the way every Immortal on the field flinched. I grinned, right up until the moment she was engulfed in apple-green flames and began screaming. Wings ablaze with eerie light, the Duke of Green Orchards stood atop the battlefield with mild disinterest writ on his face. A single hand held up, he kept Thief aloft and burning seemingly without effort.

I furiously tried to break through the Immortals ahead of me, but their ranks had tightened and the halberds were keeping me back. They weren't going for a kill, just delaying me. It was Hierophant that managed to step in.

A gust of wind blew out the flames and Thief's blackened body was dragged back behind the lines through the air. Gods, her entire hair was gone. She was scorched, but breathing and moaning in pain. Masego immediately began healing her, but she was done for the night. For more than that.

"Lady Foundling," the noble fae greeted me politely. "It appears this affair will come to close momentarily. *Perish.*"

The nightmare began. Before he'd finished speaking I'd leapt off my first ice platform and was about to land on my second, and Archer had sent her first arrow flying for his eye. The shot went through the silver flames that appeared when it got close, but it slowed enough the duke caught it with his hand, crushing the wooden shaft to powder. The other hand had lashed out with green flame, a small orb of it tumbling towards me. The size of an apple, and the exact colour. Fuck. I'd thought for sure he'd be more like the Count of Green Yew, and hoped the torched trees would mean he was limited in his power, but he obviously had a work around. That first hit on Thief had been nowhere as strong as what I'd seen some dukes and duchesses pull out, but it was still exceedingly dangerous. A twist of will had a platform to my side forming and I took a turn there to avoid the throw, frowning when I saw the apple kept tumbling down. Was he really unable to redirect those? *Oh Merciless Gods*, I realized. I lashed out with ice, trying to keep the explosion contained when it hit the Gallowborne, but it was too little and too late. Then dark globe of ice was torn through almost instantly, green flame pouring out and consuming a full tenth. It moved from there, devouring men as the Duke calmly moved his hand to guide it.

Hierophant struck directly at him, a dozen spears of what looked like water-like shimmering iron getting stuck in the silver flames as they kept pushing at it. The fae grunted and the green fire gutted out. I should have advanced, but my eyes remained on

the half-bare skull of Tribune John Farrier. Most his body was gone, even bones turned to ash. On all front of the melee the Fifteenth was giving ground, step by step as halberds tore through mail and plate. I'd known John for over a year now. Had fought by his side, bled with him and laughed with him. I'd liked him and relied on him. And he'd been swatted down carelessly, like a fucking insect.

Creation grew muted.

I could feel it all deeper now. Feel the night grow thicker, until the sight of the moon in the sky was obscured. Feel the beating from the shard of Winter that was my heart slow, and then cease entirely as I drew deeper from that well than I ever had before. My breath came out steaming and my plate crackled as frost spread over it. I peered at my anger, at my fear and calmly picked them out. I fed them to the cold, let them disappear into the flow until nothing was left at all. I'd always held back, I knew that deep down. I'd ripped the mantle of a god from its corpse and still acted the mortal. Wanted to be just Catherine Foundling. All these worries of humanity and remaining someone I could stand. *The whining of a petulant child*. I would be whoever I needed to be to keep my people alive, and damn me for flinching in the face of that truth. Beneath me the Immortals stirred and I felt the threads coming from them, those that had once bound them to the banner even in death but now lay inert. I reached out for them, two hundred threads growing into rivers as I forced the power of Winter through them. There were screams, there were curses and shaking and clawing at their armour. It made no difference to me. The Immortals died like flies, falling to the ground under the weight of my mantle.

"Rise," I ordered, and they did.

Blue eyes burning behind their visors, the pride of Summer gripping its weapons as wings of ice spread from their backs.

"Shit," Archer muttered, still among them. "That doesn't look good."

My gaze met the Duke of Green Orchards' and the man smiled.

"Ah," he said. "And now we finally meet, Duchess of Moonless Nights."

The trees in the garden below burst into green flames, apples forming by the dozens and dropping from the branches without missing a beat. I moved with four hundred wings, my snarl on the lips of every Immortal. A storm of green flame swallowed the world, and the battle began in earnest. For the first heartbeat, it was only the two of us. I could sense his will in the flames, shaping them as men and beasts to fight my Immortals. They rose into the sky, pursued by Summer wrath, and Hierophant struck

again. I saw his will slip into the green, follow along that of a lesser god and learn its workings.

"Shape is intent," the blind man whispered. "Intent fractures."

Like picks in stone, the Hierophant's will struck at the sorcery and collapsed it. With a sound like a bell the flames reverted into apples, hanging harmlessly in the air, and my Immortals buried the Duke in a storm of blades. For a heartbeat all that could be seen was a pile of armour and ivory, until branches grew out. A globe of wood was spreading, swallowing the Immortals as it did, and I could feel them struggling against the crushing pressure inside. It would not save him. My will buried like a blade in the minds of the imprisoned corpses, forcing Winter into them until their bodies were overfilled vessels. One after another they burst, ice digging into the wood and tearing it from the inside. It groaned and broke, then the Duke burst out from the top in a shower of shards. Archer's arrow would have torn through his knee, if he hadn't caught it. He raised a mocking eyebrow.

Then it blew.

Hissing in pain, his fingers shredded, he seized the floating apples again. I ignored that, plaques of ice forming under my feet as I ran across the sky to him. The flames exploded as I felt Archer tap the back of one of the surviving Immortals. Without even glancing in her direction, I sent the corpse aflight with her hanging on the back. We reached the Duke at the same time. The fae pulled the fire to him, but through ears not my own I heard Hierophant speak.

"Burning is transmutation set by boundary," he said. "Boundaries are mutable."

His will rang like a bell and the fire intensified, beginning to burn even itself until all that was left was a single flame that guttered out. Archer and I leapt together as the enemy's face darkened and he allowed himself to fall, the burnt out husks that were the trees below us collapsing into a hunks of burning wood that gathered to him in a protective shield. I grabbed Archer by the arm and tossed her at it, leaping down from a platform to follow. Her blades dug into the shield to no avail, and so did my sword. Frost spread from where I'd struck, putting out the flames but little else. A hand lightly touched the globe, Thief's scorched face grim as she leaning against Adjutant.

"**Steal**," she coldly said, and the shield disappeared.

Beneath it the Duke of Green Orchard's eyes were wide. Seven wooden pillars formed around the fae, followed by four runes linked by pale light. The same binding Hierophant had used against the Princess of High Noon. The duke's body grew rigid and

Archer's blades dug through his abdomen on both sides, straight into his lungs. I did not bother to speak. My blade ran straight through his neck, spider webs of ice spreading from the wound as life winked out of him. I panted, slowly, and felt the remaining Immortals collapse one after another. Nothing but corpses, now.

"Hierophant," I said. "Destroy the corpse."

He did not quibble. Hazy power devoured the remains, leaving nothing behind, and slowly I returned to myself. I'd taken four hundred men into battle. Sixty still lived, most of them wounded. All that remained of the roundabout was a smoking, broken wreck.

"Nauk," I croaked. "*Where is Nauk?*"

I strode through the ash and corpses, shouldering aside a legionary and glaring at the first officer I found. She paled, shivering.

"Where is your legate, lieutenant?" I seethed.

"Ma'am," she stammered, "he's..."

I saw the few remaining mages attending to the wounded as best they could, yellow light covering their palms. I could see Nauk among them. He was not moving, his breath faint. The left side of his face had been made a burnt eyeless husk, and the arm on the other side ended at the shoulder. They were not healing him. Fury spiked, the pavestones under me cracking.

"*You*," I said, hoisting the closest mage by the chest. "Why aren't you healing him?"

He only babbled uselessly, so I dropped him.

"There's nothing more they can do, Catherine," Masego said, passing me by as he knelt by the legate's side.

"Then craft me a fucking miracle, Hierophant," I hissed.

He frowned, then drew runes over Nauk. The frown deepened.

"I can keep him alive," he said. "Anything more is beyond me. Parts of his mind were shredded by the fire."

"Do it," I rasped. "Who? Who can heal him?"

Pinpricks of light formed above Nauk, sinking into the body as Masego murmured. The orc's breath grew steadier, but nothing more.

"Father," he said. "Possibly Diabolist. Or..."

He hesitated.

"Tell me," I said through clenched teeth.

"It was fae fire that did this," he said. "Fae sorcery could likely heal it."

I clenched my fingers into a fist.

"Catherine," Adjutant said.

I hadn't even noticed him approaching. Thief was further away, leaning on Archer. Neither of them met my gaze.

"Dawn is coming," he said. "We cannot linger."

I forced myself to grow calm.

"Can you do anything more?" I asked Hierophant.

He shook his head.

"They'd already stopped the bleeding from the stump," he said. "All I did was restore the organs."

"Then we go," I said, turning to the silhouette of the castle ahead. "Let's end this."

## Chapter 45: Falling Action

*"And so Maleficent said: 'Though you be god I am Empress, crowned of dread, and by my hand comes your doom. Rage in vain, for from your bones will rise a great tower whose shadow will be cast upon all the world.'"*

– Extract from the Scroll of Chains, first of the Secret Histories of Praes

The fortress that lay at the heart of Dormer jutted out incongruously, great jaws of granite gaping down at a city that had known only peace for centuries. The seat of power of the barony had been built in tiers, an elegant ring of grey stone making the first. The was power here, and not young. Though no moat had been dug into the hill, the empty circle around the castle would been a shooting gallery to bleed an investing host were the walls manned at all. But there was not a soul in sight, the faint night breeze lazily winding through deserted bastions. No contest of our advance had been made as we approached, only flames in the distance betraying the truth that Summer had yet to surrender. The pace had been irritatingly slow due to Thief's hobbling, but I had mastered my anger before it could lash out. There were more deserving targets for my wrath than those who had fought and burned for me.

The gate was the sole concession the Barons of Dormer had made to concord, sculpted columns of marble and ivory built over the

ancient rough gate and portcullis hidden away by the younger arch displaying the words and heraldry of House Kendall: *Honour Lies Immortal*, written along the curve of the wreath of ivy. I strode past the pale marble steps, the faces of the ancient rulers of the city staring back at me from the shadowed reliefs. Scenes of glory one and all, from the founding of Dormer to the first oaths sworn to House Alban when Callow was made a single kingdom. There were lies unspoken in this, victories made false by denial of failure. Winter pulsed in my veins, itching to take blade to the unsightliness. I breathed out mist and crushed the impulse. *You serve me*, I whispered at the cold. *Never the other way around*. The urges were more insidious than those my Name still caused, my own thoughts painted with a Winter brush.

The portcullis was closed, bands of steel tightly wedged into granite, and perhaps before I would have sought one of the servant entrances. But what did mere steel mean to me now? My gauntleted hands clasped around two bars, and the metal screamed as I ripped open a path. No more difficult than snapping a branch, and Winter murmured in delight at the destruction.

"That's one way to do it, I suppose," Archer said.

The first words spoken since we'd left the field where so many of my men lay dead. I did not glance back as I stepped into the courtyard. To the side I could see the smouldering ashes of what had once been stables built around the wall, but I had no interest in sightseeing. In the distance, at the heart of the fortress, I could feel a gate in the making. Not at all like mine, where my will was a knife used to cut through the boundary between Creation and Arcadia. Someone had built a canal on the other side, and was now carefully prying open the lock. The river would pour through unimpeded, when the time came, and sweep away everything that stood in its way. *A Queen is a god in the flesh*, I thought. *No creature so powerful can lightly cross boundaries*.

"There is a ward ahead," Hierophant said, studying a handful of shining runes. "Barring the inner reaches of the fortress."

"It will break," I said.

The hall we strode through was old as the walls, the raw stone made to look luxurious by tapestries and hanging drapes in the green of Kendall heraldry. The Proceran carpets under our boots had already been singed by the fae who'd once held the fortress, the edges of blackened and twisted. Stairs rose ahead into a balustrade, sculpted ivy leaves shaping the railing. We had not succeeding in getting our hands on plans of the fortress, before the battle, but I could feel the gate-to-be like the north of a compass. Further in, where the great hall where the Baroness of Dormer had once held justice and audience before the Tower stripped her of right and title both for her rebellion. How long had this castle stood, I wondered? There might be nothing left of

it but rubble, when dawn came. I guided us through the corridors, the power wafting from me eagerly scattering the last wisps of Summer's presence in little tufts of hissing steam. The air grew cool and crisp wherever we passed, and more than once I felt Hierophant shiver.

We found the ward as we emerged from the corridor that would lead us to the great hall, its copper gates laying wide open behind it. A wall, though one of woven sunlight and shivering golden Summer flame. I could feel it spread beyond my sight, a great cage of power crafted to protect the arrival of the Queen of Summer.

"How long will it take you to open a way, Hierophant?" Adjutant asked.

My sword left its sheath with a quiet hiss before the blind man could reply. I struck out, boots leaving trails of ice behind as my blade rammed against the light. The walls shook around us, but the ward stood strong.

"Knocking at the door might take a while," Archer noted, sounding amused.

"I can walk through," Thief rasped. "If Hierophant tells me how to unmake it from the inside-"

**"Break,"** I hissed.

I opened the floodgates in full, let Winter pour through my veins and seep into the most destructive of my aspects. My blood was cold, I only now noticed. It had been for some time. Yet I felt no weaker for it, the frost instead lending a sharp clarity that it had once taken effort to reach. *Duchess*, I thought. My will found easier purchase when bending Creation to its will. Shade and ice flared along the edge of my sword as it struck the ward and for a heartbeat it felt like I was trading blows with the Duke of Green Orchards again. Then the ward broke, as I'd ordered it to. Stone around us shattered as well, the walls anchoring the sorcery torn through as the ward desperately scrabbled to remain coherent. There was a sliver of life in it, a will to guide it. Had they sacrificed a fae to forge this? No matter. Ice smothered that wisp of thought, blanketing the corridor. I resumed marching through the ruins surrounding us, the wide doors of copper held up only by a thin arc of granite as I passed through them. Adjutant caught up to me first, leaning close.

"Catherine," he murmured, though we both knew the others would be able to hear anyway. "Calm yourself, before you begin making mistakes."

"I am calm," I replied, and I was. "What I am is *out of patience*. If it gets in my way, it dies. We're past half-measures, Adjutant."

The orc looked as if he wanted to argue, but I was disinclined to allow it. The great hall lay spread out before us, a shabby thing compared to those I had walked in the Tower. Long tables on both sides flanked a supplicant's path leading to stone platform set against the back wall and the tall glass windows over it, the dying moon cloaking the simple bench of whitewood on it in a halo of light. *There*, I thought. The crossing would take place there. Let it not be said the Queen of Summer would ever settle for less than a throne, in any world she strode. Hierophant came to stand by my side as the others milled around the hall.

"Still the better part of an hour before dawn, by my calculations," the mage said.

"There's no need to wait that long," I said. "Implement the contingency."

Eyes of glass shifted to me under black cloth, a brow rising.

"You know my study of the sun is incomplete," Hierophant said. "Should I be forced to loose the arrow the Due would be comparable to that of the very event that named the concept. There will be no city left, no armies, and it is unlikely anything will grow of these grounds before Creation is unmade."

"One does not call a god to heel without risking calamity," I said.

He paused.

"I want to work a pathing spell on your mind," he said. "This is reckless even by your standards."

"Winter has nothing to do with this," I said. "But if it will make you feel better, by all means."

His touch against my forehead was surprisingly warm, as was the sorcery that seeped into my mind. I could feel it curling like smoke along my thoughts, until finally he withdrew.

"It is influencing you," he said.

"But," I said.

"No more than the mantle of your Name," he admitted. "Your mind is still your own."

I heard Archer let out a baited breath, behind me. Hierophant no longer quibbled after that. It was a wonder, watching him work. I'd seen him weave sorcery before, even High Arcana, but this



went a step beyond. Eyes closed, heartbeat almost still, the blind man crafted me a miracle. It was not runes that he threaded together but echoes of things he had seen, flickers of great feats he had witnessed. I saw his father's silhouette standing before a tower that built itself turning into the Princess of High Noon with her hands raised, a pyramid of blood-streaked mud lying at the heart of a maze melding with a glimpse of a city rising into the sky. Pillars of translucent, shimmering power struck the ground in a perfect circle around him and I felt their reach rise through the ceiling into the night sky above. Eventually, he opened his eyes.

"Thief," he said. "Release the sun."

The burns on the heroine's face had peeled off, replaced by red and tender skin through healing magic, and so I read the hesitation on her face plainly.

"There is no need to be afraid," I said.

No, not us. Not today. She nodded slowly, and fingers found the pouch at her side.

"Here it goes," she said, and opened it.

The glare was blinding, for a heartbeat. Hierophant's unearthly ward caught it whole, drawing it to the pillars as even the coldness coming from my frame was swept away by the raging heat. And then it dimmed, as suddenly as it had come. The mage grunted in effort. It hurt my eyes to look at it, but I did not look away: I might never see such a sight again. The ceiling above us was not torn through so much as it evaporated, the fortress around us melting like butter in the heat. The sun of Summer rose into the sky, chasing night away, and with it came dawn. I turned my eyes to the dais as the lock gave and the Queen of Summer came, granted entry by our will. There was no gate. Between two moments, absence was filled a young girl. Golden curls streaming down her white robe, she still looked half a child and every inch a farmer's daughter. There was nothing unearthly about her tan and her dimples, or those brown eyes that could have belonged to any mortal. The left side of her body was touched with red, bandages peeking through the collar of her robe. Ranger had wounded her, at least.

"Oh, children," she sadly said. "You know not what you do."

It would have thought her mortal, if not for the hint of pressure behind her. Like she was the seal on a boundless ocean that could sweep over Creation at any time. Winter coiled inside me, frozen furious hatred that wanted to rip her small frame apart no matter the cost to me or anyone else. I ignored it.

"You have been summoned," I said, "to discuss terms of surrender."

"Come to me, my armies," the Queen said.

I did not need to look to know every fae in Dormer had taken to the sky, the words touching their minds. The city emptied in moments as wings flared and the tide of soldiers flowed towards us. Hierophant staggered as if hit in the guts, blood wetting his lips. The Princess of High Noon, I thought, had just been freed from her prison. Over the molten ruins of the fortress surrounding us ranks upon ranks of soldiers and pennants stood perched in silence, more arriving every heartbeat, and only then did the Queen turn her eyes to me.

"So many dead," she mourned. "You have earned him victory with your blood, Duchess. Yet Summer does not surrender. You know this. You have seen it with your own eyes."

"You have three duties," I said.

"She's trying for the sun," Hierophant said, tone alarmed.

"Destroy it, Masego," I said.

It was with vicious satisfaction that I saw surprise twist the Queen's face.

"A desperate lie," she said, but I felt her power still. "You would destroy us all. Break this land beyond mending."

It wasn't fear I saw in those eyes, not exactly. I wasn't sure she really could be afraid. But there was uncertainty. Hesitation. Three words, and I had stayed the hand of a god. My lips twitched, and strange joy bubble up in my chest. I laughed, loudly, and allowed a hard grin to split my face.

"If I can't win, you misbegotten thing, then we will all lose," I hissed. "Look into my eyes. Tell me again I'm lying."

I would have rocked back, had I not gone through the crucible of standing judgement before the Hashmallim. An entity infinitely greater than I enveloped everything that I was, will beyond comprehension taking sight of everything that I was and had been. The Beast coiled at my side and whispered back. *Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.* The Queen of Summer flinched.

"Madness," she said, appalled.

"I am a villain," I laughed. "I stand before you the pupil of a madman, heiress to a thousand years of darkness and terror. Test me again and I will make this a wasteland to have even the Gods shudder."

"Summer does not retreat," the Queen said, and it rang like a thunderclap.

"Summer has *lost*," I replied unblinkingly. "As we speak the Prince of Nightfall breaches the walls of Aine, the city you are sworn to protect. Around you stands the butchered remnants of your host, awaiting doom at Winter's hand. And in my palm lies your Sun, three words away from destruction. The Laurel Crown has three duties, and in those three duties you have failed."

There was a moment of silence, before the Queen sighed.

"And so comes the dying of the light," she murmured. "The wheel spins, Catherine Foundling. To end is to begin. We will not go with a whimper."

My heart would have thundered, if I still had one.

"Or," I said. "I could give you exactly what you want. Aine safeguarded. Winter unmade. The Sun returned to your sky."

"You promise beyond your ability," she said.

"All I require from you is a word, and you will get your wish," I smiled. "And I ask a boon granted, for what I deliver to you."

She studied me again, tasted the truth of my words.

"This," she said, "has never happened before."

"And never will again," I said.

"I will hear the terms of the bargain offered," the Queen of Summer said.

It was no coincidence it happened the moment she spoke the words. The grooves carved into Creation would have ensured as much, smoothly turning truth to story. Coincidence that was anything but. At my side power coalesced, stealing the efforts of Summer to allow its ruler to cross as a path of its own. A circle left open closed, as with a sharp smile the King of Winter came into Creation to face his created opposite. Sleek and dark-skinned and crowned in dead wood seeping red, the fae breathed in the air of Creation with relish.

"Oh, what a beautiful morning," he said.

"Treachery," the Queen of Summer said, words ringing of steel and the death of men.

"Ever a favoured diversion," the King agreed. "Though I come for something... stranger."

He turned his eyes on me, the gaze of a teacher pleasantly surprised by a pupil. I itched to carve them out of his skull, and not using something sharp.

"With your permission, Duchess?" he said.

"According to the terms offered by Her Dread Majesty," I replied.

"You will have your boon, greedy one," he said. "Ah, but what a daughter of Winter you make. Is she not delightful, Ista?"

I grit my teeth to get through the pain of hearing the name of the Summer Queen spoken, feeling Masego go rigid as a board as he did the same. Coat of black sweeping behind him, the man walked to his enemy and with a flourish he knelt.

"Ista of the Morning Star," he said. "Bearer of the Laurel Crown, Queen of Summer Triumphant. I ask your hand in marriage, to rule Arcadia an equal by my side."

He extended his own smoothly. One word, I'd told the Queen. She could still have it all, if she only said yes. The armies of Winter would end the assault of Aine, I would return the Sun and Winter would be undone. I watched the kneeling fae with cold, cold smile. I'd made an oath, once that I would unmake him. And I just had, with him having to thank me for it. *There will be no more Winter*, I thought. *Only a single court ruling Arcadia, neither and both*. The Empress had been right. The pivot was always going to be the Winter King, because he was the only entity that would see my preferred outcome as a victory. It had all hinged on him agreeing, because he was the oddity and he could make decisions that led outside the stories he despised. Summer would have to be forced, I'd known from the start, and I'd done exactly that. The Queen would agree, because she could not do otherwise. She was bound to seek to discharge her duties, and I'd put her in a corner with acceptance as the only way out. To refuse here would mean actively going against what she was, *and she could not physically do that*. Black had told me once that I'd kill Akua, one of these days, not because of my own power but because her nature would force her to make mistakes I would not. I wondered if he would proud, that I had used his lesson to destroy two gods without lifting a finger against either of them.

"I accept your offer," the Summer Queen said, taking his hand, and I could see the horror on her face.

She was fighting it, trying to take back the words. But she couldn't, just like the Rider of the Host I'd once forced to monologue by playing the hero. The change that followed the words was hard to describe. It wasn't something I saw or felt. Neither of them metamorphosed into something different. But it was no longer two separate entities that were before me. I'd heard a riddle once, in Laure. *When is a stone not as stone – when it is*

a wall. Nothing changed, yet it was not the same. The king rose to his feet, and pressed a tender kiss on the cheek of the livid queen.

"And so the war comes to a close," the King of Arcadia said. "A realm cannot be at war with itself."

A shiver went through the host of fae around us, as is something had been torn out of them.

"The matter of boons remains," the Queen of Arcadia said, and the eyes she turned on me were burning. "Promises must be kept."

I stood before two gods and did not kneel. I would not, in this moment, pretend this was anything but my win. That I'd bled thousands on the field, caused the death of men dear to me for anything less but utter victory.

"Upon the granting, you will have discharged your duty to me," the King said. "And so will have earned the return of your heart. What do you request of us, Duchess of Moonless Nights?"

"Of you, I request release from vassalage forevermore," I told the fae.

"I am most saddened to grant this," the dark-skinned king said.

He did not seem surprised. I turned my eyes to the queen. I would have to tread carefully, here. If I fumbled the phrasing, she'd do her best to fuck me over. The temptations lay in the back of my mind, beckoning sweetly. To go back on my deal with the Empress and request that the whole of Arcadia come together to kill Diabolist. *But she's not wrong. They'll wreck the entire central plains to do it, and we'd be risking some fae influence remaining.* And there was another, young but no less demanding for it. I could ask them to heal Nauk. It would be a trifle, to them. But there might be other means to save my legate. And I would never get this chance again. A heroine, I thought, would have made the right choice. The only justifiable one. But I was not a heroine, and justifications only mattered to the just.

I spoke, and betrayed a man I called my friend.

"Of you I ask permanent right of passage through Arcadia for me and all I command, uncontested and unhindered," I said, voice hollow.

"I grant you this," the Queen replied curtly.

"And so peace is upon us," the King said. "Steel yourself, Catherine Foundling."

I felt the hand tear through my chest before I could even open my lips, and the world went dark.

## Chapter 46: Denouement

*"Never wound a man you do not intend to kill."*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

*It was a strange thing, to bury a man. Of the Praesi only the Soninke shared the custom, and even then only the highborn who boasted ancient labyrinth-mausoleums of baked mud to receive their own. Peasants and Taghreb burned their dead instead, save for those who had sold their remains to corpse-raisers while they still lived. There were no ancient mazes in the Green Stretch, and the dues to the dead were different for Duni. It was said that some of Amadeus' people still kept to the Gods Above in hidden places, conducting rituals even without priests to bless them, but his family had not been so twisted. Mother had proudly served in the Legions, after all, and thought little of the ornate boot-licking westerners called religion. Yet Duni buried their dead like Callowans did, the nature of that half-stolen custom changed by centuries upon centuries of Praesi rule and all that came with it. The Squire's shovel patted the surface of the freshly turned wet black earth, the last grave he would dig today.*

*There were four of them. Father, Clarent, Belladona and Valerius. He'd not spoken to any of them since deserting the Legions, and the first time in three years he'd laid eyes on his family had been to see them crucified by the burnt-out husk of the farm. The Heir had not needed to sign his work, for he had already boasted of it. Discipline, he'd called it, for a mudfoot who did not understand his place in the world. The Soninke had not well taken his defeat in Callow, the way Ranger's knowledge of the lay of the land had allowed Amadeus to lead the paladins to his enemy's camp instead of his own. Sabah had offered to help him dig, meaning kindness though the offer was ignorant. Wekesa had not, no more learned in Duni customs but instinctively knowing the offer would be crossing a boundary. It was Hye, in her own cold way, who had honoured his family. She'd stood vigil at his side in silence as he dug, a sacrifice of hours freely offered to people she had never met.*

*Amadeus wedged the shovel into the ground and stood by the unmarked graves he'd dug by the side of Mother's. Silently, he unsheathed a knife and split open his palm. Passing from grave to grave he trickled droplets of red the way he had been taught even as his companions stood behind him, still and quiet. There would be incomprehension on their faces, he knew. Praesi knew well the power of blood, but were wary of spilling their own. There were many rituals a skilled mage could work, with such a reagent. But there were no consecrated grounds in the Stretch, to prevent corpse-theft, and the Tower did not care to chastise necromancers that kept to the practice if their birth was high enough. The*

spilling of blood, to Duni, was an oath. 'They who marked that grave in red will seek redress, should this grave be disturbed.' He could have spoken the word, but he alone stood pale-skinned on this field. There would have been no meaning in it.

He had wept, taking them down from the crosses, but the tears had dried and left nothing behind. Amadeus did not recognize his own voice when he told the others to leave him to the vigil, to be stood until the moon rose. It was too raw a thing to be his, absent of calm and thought. They deferred, though before long Ranger returned to his side. Hye knew no commands but her own desires.

"We'll kill him for this," she whispered, standing at his side.

The green-eyed man smiled.

"The Heir," he said, "meant to cloud my mind. Fill it with grief and anger. Unusually clever of him, truth be told. I lose much if I lose my distance from it all."

"It always turns on them, plots like this," the half-elf said. "They get more than they bargained for."

Amadeus studied the palm he had cut mere hours ago, finding it perfectly smooth. It would not scar. Wounds on Named rarely did, lest they were dire or meaningful. He wondered what kind of man it made him, that this was not meaningful to him. He wondered if he should grieve that he could not manage to care. Had he been this cold, before he became the Squire? It was hard to remember.

"He made a mistake," the Duni said. "Not the one you believe this. This is just... insufficient."

Ranger did not answer. She'd always had a talent for that, knowing when to fill silence and let it stand.

"I believed I loved them," Amadeus said. "But I killed them, Hye, the moment I claimed my Name. I always knew that. Stories require clean breaks. We cannot have homes to return to, however humble they may be."

"You absolve him for this act?" the honey-skinned woman asked.

"No, not that," the man murmured. "Never that. One must stand responsible for one's actions. But it would be unseemly, to blame solely his hand for this end. If not him, Creation would have seen to the matter otherwise. Paladins venturing deeper into the Stretch, perhaps. Or wisps of a faraway ritual poisoning them in agony. Foe would have been provided, Ranger. Evil ever grows through conflict."

"You could have fought it," she said.

*"And lost," he replied. "Creation can be gamed. We have proved this. But it cannot be overturned. There are lessons to be learned from the Tyrants of old. Power is not earned with clean hands. Their mistake was only to think bloodying them anew will always bring gain."*

*He saw Ranger's lips quirk into a rueful smile.*

*"And now you debate philosophy over fresh graves," she said. "Your grief lasted as long as the tears."*

*"I began grieving them the moment I became the Squire," Amadeus said. "This will not turn my path, Hye. A loss has been added to the tally, that's all. There will be many, many more."*

*"And love?" she said.*

*"A sweet thing, to be sure," the Squire said. "But love is not what I bared my blade for."*

*She laughed, quietly.*

*"You're not boring at all, are you?" she said. "The blood you spilled, what does it mean?"*

*"An oath," Amadeus said. "A warning."*

*Ranger's knife glinted silver in the dark as she cut her palm, joining her blood to his own on the dark earth. He met her eyes and wondered what was watching him back, that hard and blazing thing that had his heart skipping a beat.*

*"And now what, Squire?" she teased.*

*"I read a play once," Amadeus replied. "Forbidden by Imperial decree. There is a part I enjoyed, and it goes like this-"*

*His voice carried, without ever rising in tone.*

*"Be fearful now  
tremble; for  
my reach is long  
my wrath is great  
patient but  
unrivalled  
above or below."*

*Hye's answering smile was a thing of death and Amadeus looked away, staring up at the stars and letting his grief ebb to the sound of grinding wheels of steel.*

*I woke to a riot of light. I was naked, I promptly noticed, and on a bed of stone. I did not feel the cold in the slightest, which I did not take to mean much considering I similarly felt*



nothing of twin clamps and scalpel someone had shoved into my chest. Masego, unsurprisingly sitting at my bedside with his brow creased, idly dismissed a rune that had formed to the side of his head without looking away.

"Don't move," he ordered. "This is precision work."

"Good morning to you too," I croaked, forcing myself to remain still.

"It's past Noon Bell," he noted.

It said a lot about my life these days that I was largely unmoved by the sight of a man sitting by my naked body elbow-deep in my chest without my say-so. His free hand reached for the scalpel, delicately set aside, and the fingers I couldn't see pivoted something inside my body. There was a click, felt though not heard, and I felt Winter bloom through my veins. The well, I realized with widened eyes, was not gone. The mantle was still laid upon my shoulders. Taking out something that looked like a torturer's tool out of me, Hierophant clicked his tongue in satisfaction. He prodded with a long rune-covered stick at what should have been my lungs, by the angle, and though my body felt nothing I could feel something pressing against Winter. With a nod, he set aside the stick and removed the clamps.

"It'll take at least a sennight to settle properly," he said. "But the working was successful."

"Now," I said, "would be a good time to explain what exactly you did."

I was a little amused that neither of us cared all that much about my nakedness, but set that aside in favour of actually learning what the Hells was going on.

"Neither your soul nor your body could support the title without the metaphysical stabilizer the king replaced your heart by," the blind man said. "Your power began destroying your body the moment he removed it, and the edges of your soul were fracturing."

"You predicted as much," I said. "Didn't you carve some sort of protection on my ribs when you tinkered with the moon?"

"My calculations were inaccurate," he said, and he sounded deeply pained. "The runes shattered within the first hour. You are the last titled entity of Winter, Catherine. That had unforeseen consequences."

I rose to a sitting position, and spied neatly-folded clothes on a chair to my right. *Ah, Hakram, you prince among men.* I put a shirt on, though I couldn't be bothered to hop around putting on

trousers and underclothes before I got a full explanation out of Masego.

"So things got fucked," I summarized. "How'd that translate to 'get elbow-deep inside Catherine without even buying her a bottle first'?"

"I wish you would rephrase that," he sighed. "I created an artificial framework around your soul to support the power. To anchor it properly into you, there was need for some surgical work."

"So it's all good," I proposed.

"To an extent," he conceded. "The power is no longer entirely intrinsic."

"What do entrances have to do with this?" I said, grinning wretchedly and with full awareness of what I was doing.

He visibly twitched, to my delight.

"Intrinsic," he insisted. "Meaning-"

"We all know what entrances are, Masego," I interrupted smoothly. "What does that mean, practically speaking?"

"That the framework can be attacked," he said through gritted teeth. "Through sorcerous means. It can also only withstand the fullness of your power for some time, at least until I've put together a stronger array. That may take months, there is no precedent for this I am aware of."

"So you put scaffolding around my soul," I mused.

"An uneducated yokel might describe my work in such a manner, yes," he said.

"And mages can take an axe to the scaffolding if they know what to look for," I continued. "Which would be bad."

"Yes, Catherine, someone ripping out a working *attached to your very soul* would be 'bad'," he hissed. "How astutely deduced of you."

"Are we talking decked in the face by Captain bad, or 'oh shit I just mouthed off to the Hashmallim' bad?" I squinted.

"That is not a quantifiable scale," he began, but rallied valiantly. "Are you familiar with the concept of cascading failures?"

"The Wasaliti doesn't have falls on it, Masego," I told him helpfully. "You really should have paid closer attention when you studied geography."

The dark-skinned man opened his mouth, closed it, then rose to his feet.

"I wash my hands of this," he announced. "We'll finish this talk when you're capable of taking anything seriously."

"Don't be like that, Zeze," I grinned.

I put my hand over my heart in a solemn oath.

"I promise not to yank your chain anymore," I lied.

He studied me for a long moment.

"You always say that," he complained. "But you never do."

He was learning, I would give him that much. He promised to send in Hakram on his way out, after giving me long enough to get dressed so I would not offend Adjutant's delicate orcish sensibilities. I'd screwed with him mostly because it amused me, but there'd been the shadow of another intent in there. A little time alone to process the Name dream I still remembered with eerie clarity would not go amiss. There was a lot to parse there, aside from a few revelations I could have done without – namely that watching Black turn into the Carrion Lord had got Ranger going and that she probably saw taking out knives as foreplay. I was not overly surprised on either count. My Name had always been heavy-handed with the hints and I knew better than to always follow the vague advice the dreams carried with them, but this one had been particularly direct. My teacher had buried his family, and odds are before the day was done I'd have to light John Farrier's pyre. *A sweet thing, to be sure, but love is not what I bared my blade for.* Fresh on the back of my hesitating to ask Nauk's healing as a boon, that struck particularly close to home.

There were dangers to caring for my men, and considering setting aside a war-winning trump card for a single man to wake again made them stand out starkly. My Name was telling me to grow harsher. That the moment I'd let the Lone Swordsman go I'd begun a path that would be paved with the corpses of foes and friends alike. There was truth in that I could not deny. If what I set out to accomplish was greater than any of the myriad souls that made the whole, I should not flinch in the face of sacrificing any of them. To do otherwise would be crippling myself from the onset. The priests of the House of Light would have called that embarking on the path to damnation, but oh that ship had sailed long ago hadn't it? I found it hard to reconcile the smiling man I trusted with the man bathed in starlight speaking those quiet

words, but they were one and the same. Neither false, perhaps, but if they ever came at odds I knew which would win. I had seen the Black Knight's face bared of the pretence of civility.

"You're telling me to let go," I murmured.

I'd never been particularly good at that. I wasn't sure I wanted to start. You could win wars, I knew, without thinking like him. Without tallying it all in my mind, staring at Creation through the prism of gain and loss. But I remembered the sight of the burnt skull of a man who'd trusted me, believed in me, and I could not help but wonder if I might have avoided that if... Some Empress or other had once said that the worst sin a villain could commit was hesitate. She'd not been wrong. Every moment I spared to gaze at my hands and ask whether there was too much blood on them or not enough, my enemies were moving. Growing in strength as I stood still. *There is a point where continuing to ask a question makes it meaningless, because Creation has already passed you by.* Diabolist would not care for my qualms. Neither would the Empress, or the First Prince or whatever greater threat lurked behind them because wasn't there always something larger? I smiled bitterly. I was, in the end, a practical woman. It mattered more to live than to be someone I could live with.

I slipped on the rest of my clothes in silence, and was fitting my boots when Adjutant rapped his knuckles against the door. I called out for him to enter.

"Cat," he said, studying me closely. "How are you feeling?"

"Like the war's not over," I said bluntly. "Report."

"You were under for a day and a night," he said. "The Deoraithe are getting restless, you'll need to settle the Duchess soon. I've had Robber watch them, there's more to this than just wanting to strike at Diabolist. The Watch are acting oddly."

"Akua's making her move," I grunted. "I suppose I should be thankful she didn't show up in the middle of the battle to fuck everything up."

"She is no longer in a position where she can move quietly," Adjutant noted. "She must be very, very careful. If she slips now, even once, it will be the end of her."

"Fifteenth?" I asked, steeling myself.

"Casualties were significant," he grimaced, unknowingly baring fangs. "The fight for the upper ring bled us dry."

"Give me numbers," I said.

"Aisha's still tallying them," he said.

I frowned.

"You don't have to coddle me," I said flatly. "It's been more than a day. The captains will have handed in their reports."

"We had another situation to deal with that delayed matters," Hakram replied. "Diabolist sent envoys. They're currently awaiting audience with you outside the city."

I heard the leather rip as my fingers tightened around it. Fuck. One of these days I was going to be able to take a nap without waking to a fire urgently in need of putting out, but evidently it wouldn't be today.

"Get me another pair of boots," I sighed.

## Chapter 47: Offers

*"Here is the truth of our dreadful crown: to claim it a declaration of war on banality, on mediocrity. The banner of the enemy is apathy, the slow grind of the inevitable. Victor or ruin, every Tyrant that ever lived bet their madness against the bridle of the Heavens."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II

I wore plate, a suit of it untouched since it had left the Imperial forges of Ater. My own had been wrecked by combat, both my power and that of my enemies. It would be days before our smiths could make anything of it, and Akua Sahelian's envoys awaited me now. The goblin steel covered by the red tabard of the Legions had been forged for someone of broader build than I, and so the aketon I wore underneath was bolstered with more padding. The cloak I that streamed down my back had long ceased to be dark, strips of banners sown onto the length by Hakram's clever hands. I knew them well, those marks. The Silver Spears, the colours of House Talbot and Kendall, and now greater honours still. Cloth of wind for the Duke of Violent Squalls, a red tongue of heatless flame torn from the Princess of High Noon and now a golden ribbon ripped from one of the banners of the Immortals, the Queen of Summer's own. The black cloth that still looked like feathers in the right light was half-covered, by now, and in time there would be more. The collar of the cloak felt tight against my neck, worn in the Praesi style, but I wore it regardless. It was a statement. *All these were mighty, once. Now I bear them on my back. Think twice, before you take a swing.*

The envoys Diabolist had sent numbered twelve. Three times that number in Legion mages kept them under ward, but I was unconvinced it would be enough if they truly wanted to get up to something. My mages were hardened veterans, but most they knew of magic had been taught at the War College. They were no match for practitioners who'd inherited legacies old as the Kingdom of

Callow, centuries of tricks and trumps that no one outside the Wasteland had more than glimpsed. Into the pavilion that lay at the epicentre of the heavy wards, I took only two people with me. Aisha, whose knowledge of Wasteland currents I may very well need to navigate that conversation, and Hakram. Him I trusted to see what I did not, and to keep me from making mistakes. I parted the cloth flaps and found only two of Diabolist's people were seated, the rest standing patiently behind them. One Taghreb, one Soninke. Both women I had never seen before, though that meant little. Akua and I drew talent from different pools. I'd inherited ties to the Legions from my teacher and links to Named besides, but my nemesis had the highborn of Praes at her disposal.

I had her beat in Named and armies, as far as I was concerned, but in most everything else we were either matched or she my better.

The two who'd been seated when I entered smoothly rose and bowed. I'd learned a bit since my first public humiliation at Court, in large part because of the very woman at my side, and so I was able to dissect the nuances. The angle was lower than that owed to an Imperial Governor, yet higher than the one a ruling High Lord would expect. As with most things Sahelian, the gestured bordered between compliment and insult.

"Your Grace," the Soninke said in Lower Miezani. "This humble servant is Deka Wolde, *mfuasa* to Wolof since the Declaration. At my side stands Samiah of Fatimi, sworn to the Qara."

My eyes narrowed at the second name, flicking to the Taghreb. Fatimi was the name of the lordship Ratface's father ruled, the Supply Tribune's name before he'd taken another at the College having been Hasan Qara. He was, I remembered, a member in decent standing of the Truebloods. Whether he'd since joined with the Moderates I had no idea, but if he'd sent one of his own with Diabolist that seemed doubtful.

"Lady Sahelian sends strange envoys," Aisha drawled in Taghrebi. "Blood treats, sand shifts."

I forced myself not to raise an eyebrow. I knew what the saying meant, more or less. Praesi nobles usually only ever negotiated with other nobles, even though ruling lords and ladies rarely met face to face. It was a show of good faith to have a relative sitting at the table. When the Soninke had called herself *mfuasa*, it meant she was from one of the so-called 'servant blood'. Retainer families that, while not highborn, had been in the service of a High Lord's line for so long they were considered to have higher status than the rest of us peasants. Powerful mage lines usually fell into that, since it was always useful to have a few spares around to breed some talent into the blood. This Deka's family, if she was to be believed, had been in the service

of the Miezans since the founding of the Empire. Still didn't make her noble, though. A statement could be read in that, considering I was now Lady of Marchford and a Duchess besides: *the highest of Praesi servants stand equal to foreign titles*. Ah, good ol' Akua. She never was one to pass a good slight when opportunity knocked.

"This humble servant offers manifold apologies," Dekka said, bowing again. "The Lady Diabolist means no slight. It was understood that Vicequeen Foundling may not take kindly to one of the true blood."

I almost snorted. So Diabolist was worried if she sent an aristocrat all she'd get back was the head. Yeah, I could buy that.

"Sit," I said.

Dekka bowed again.

"This humble servant dares not gainsay you, but must offer the word of her mistress," she said. "The Lady Diabolist requests that Lord Hierophant attend this conference."

"This isn't a place where Akua Sahelian gets to make requests," Hakram gravelled.

Another bow. Gods, her back was going to kill her by day's end. Unless they'd bred her family for the flexible spines, which horrifying enough might actually be the case. You never fucking knew with the Wasteland's old blood.

"It is as you say, Lord Adjutant," Dekka said.

I sighed.

"Aisha, have them send a runner," I told my Staff Tribune. "Make sure he knows it's not a suggestion on my part."

She nodded and saw to it. If that wasn't clear enough he might ignore the summons, and that would just be awkward. The envoys might take issue with grabbing a seat before Masego showed up, but I did not in the slightest. I took the seat appropriated from Summer a while back and leaned back against the cushion. I studied the ten standing in silence behind the envoys, now that I had the attention to spare. They were, I saw, what the soldiers of the Legions of Terror had been once upon a time. The true heart of the old hordes that had battered Callow's gates, not the greenskins tossed used to blunt charges and the levies sent to die storming walls. Soninke and Taghreb, dressed in ornate mail from head to toe that glimmered with sorcery. Their swords would be enchanted as well, every city weaving its preferred spells into the steel as they were forged. Helmets with curtains of mail

on the sides and a descending prong of steel covering the nose revealed hard eyes, made to stand out by the colourful scarves tied around their necks. My people had fought men like these for centuries, until Black had replaced them with the legionaries I commanded. They were not to be underestimated, and it was their kind that would make up a great deal of Diabolist's host in Liesse. They were standing around what looked like a tightly bound rectangular package taller than I was, which brought questions considering the sorcery I could faintly feel coming from it. My men had already investigated and I'd gotten a report saying it was a mirror inside, which might mean scrying with Diabolist herself was in the cards.

There were no refreshments on the table, and I did not offer any. Aisha seated herself at my left, leaving the other side open for Hakram though he stood behind me instead. It was Masego that dropped into the chair, when he finally arrived. He looked irritated, though his brow rose in interest when he laid glass eyes on the two main envoys.

"Mages?" I asked.

"Above average talents," he said. "The Taghreb in particular. Drake blood, is it? I'd heard some families near the Eyries managed to bring it into the line."

"The compliment honours me greatly, Lord Hierophant," Samiah said, bowing even lower than she had for me. "This servant's ancestors knew fortunate encounters."

"Your ancestors managed not to turn themselves into scaled abominations when stealing properties from famously unstable lifeblood," Hierophant noted. "That takes skill as well as fortune. I confess curiosity. Is your blood thicker than that of a baseborn human? Your heart certainly beats slower."

"Masego, we don't ask people about their blood thickness at diplomatic conferences," I sighed. "Sit, you two. What does Akua want? Last I saw her I was one oath away from repeatedly shoving steel in her throat until she stopped twitching."

The two women bowed as smoothly as they had rise, seating themselves across us.

"An explanation for the mirror would be warranted, before beginning is had," Aisha said.

She spoke Lower Miezani, but the cadence of the words was all Taghrebi. The way she'd avoided using pronouns was as well. Aisha called it 'noble dialect', and every major Praesi language had a form of it. It was the kind of impersonal double-talk highborn used in negotiations with each other, conventions established ages ago that had become unspoken law. Formal diplomatic language



that Akua had never bothered to use in her dealings with me before, or any highborn Praesi I'd met for that matter. That I was usually killing or coercing them at the time likely had something to do with it. Still, it was interesting she was dusting off the manners now. Whatever the envoys were after, Diabolist was willing to pretend she was taking me seriously for it. Funny how people suddenly became polite after you murdered a demigod.

"This humble servant brings word from the Lady Diabolist," Samiah said. "The tool is meant to provide sympathetic link for scrying. Authority to treat in the name of the Lady has not been granted, for the Lady would treat directly."

"Hierophant?" I prompted.

The dark-skinned mage leaned forward in his seat.

"Wolofite scrying array, the kind the Sahelians kept to themselves," he said. "A few hidden runes to record sound but—"

Light trickled between Masego's fingers and a hiss came from the hidden mirror, the acrid smell of smoke filling the pavilion.

"—they have been dealt with," he finished. "There will be no surprises. Provincial work, whoever carved these. The pathing spells to find double-bind runes have been known for decades."

If the envoys were miffed Hierophant had just casually marred what was probably an ancient and expensive heirloom belonging to their mistress, they showed no sign of it. Unlike Masego I had a decent read on the Diabolist, and I knew there was no way she'd have missed the fact that with him in the room there would be no sneaking those runes through. Odds were it was an old artefact, and he'd just casually burned a chunk of it because he disliked the quality. *Either she's showing off her wealth and what little she cares of it as a reminder of the resources she has at her disposal, or it was the artefact best suited for this conversation and she simply didn't care since our talk is important enough to warrant the loss. Either way, Akua, your point has been received*

"Proceed," I waved nonchalantly.

The envoys rose and bowed before delicately undoing the bindings around the cloth covering the mirror, setting it up so that it faced us to the height of a standing person. Fancy. The two women touched a palm to the silver surface they'd revealed, sorcery sinking into the metal before they stepped away and joined the soldiers. There was a ripple across the surface, and then I looked at Diabolist in the flesh. As usual, she'd dressed to make an impression. Red and gold, which I'd come to notice were favourites of hers, made up the silks of her long and perfectly

fitted dress. I would have been able to appreciate the sight of that perfect hourglass figure and smooth long legs if the very sight of her didn't make me want to reach for my sword. I noticed, after a heartbeat, that she was seated on what appeared to be a throne. Some gaudy thing of gold and jewels, with arms that ended in the grinning faces of devils. I leaned towards Aisha.

"Isn't it illegal for anyone but the ruling Tyrant to sit on a throne?" I asked.

"Since the Declaration, yes," she replied faintly.

I snorted, turning my eyes back to Diabolist.

"Well, apparently you're done fucking around," I said. "There's a nice change of pace."

Akua's golden eyes studied me emotionlessly.

"It is unfortunate," she said, "that someone gave you the impression your mannerisms are charming. Dekka?"

"This one feels power comparable in scale to a Prince of Summer," the Soninke said.

My hand rose and she began choking as her throat filled with ice, clawing at the skin desperately. Aisha stilled at my side. Not a single other person in the pavilion moved.

"Envoys are covered by law," I said. "Spies aren't."

Diabolist watched my actions with detached curiosity. *She wrote her off before ever sending her*, I realized. *Trading a fresh eye on me for a retainer's life*. I lowered my hand.

"Walk out," I said calmly. "Present yourself to the nearest legionary. You are now a prisoner of war."

The woman looked to Akua, who inclined her head by the barest fraction.

"This humble servant thanks you for your mercy, Your Grace," Dekka bowed to me.

"You're trying my patience," I noted calmly, and gave Hakram a glance.

Understanding passed without need for words. He'd see to it, and led her out.

"It was necessary," Diabolist said, "to understand who I was treating with before we began in earnest."

I smiled coldly.

"Where's all that nice flowery noble tongue gone to, Diabolist?" I asked. "Your people were being so sweet to me before."

The Soninke smiled like we were old friends. It never reached the eyes.

"This noble one will, of course, be glad to offer such courtesy should it be returned," she said.

"I'd have to stop cussing if we did, right?" I asked Aisha.

She nodded.

"Carry the fuck on," I told Diabolist with a winning smile.

I was being ornery mostly because I'd rather eat a bowl of knives than be civil to the monster on the other side of the mirror, but there was another intent behind it. Now and then I managed to get under her skin, and that had a way of tripping her up. I'd never managed it before outside a death match, but there was no loss to me here even if it failed. Flipping the finger to Akua's noble sensibilities was reward in and of itself.

"You appear to have dealt with the fae invasion, Squire," Akua said. "I offer you congratulations."

"I don't think well deep enough in Creation to throw those down that would convey how little they mean to me," I cheerfully retorted.

"You have done great service to the Empire," Diabolist said, unruffled.

I supposed after actually trying to stab her verbal digs felt a little lacking from her side of the equation.

"You've abducted one of said Empire's cities," I said. "Don't suppose you'd care to give it back?"

"That could be arranged," she said. "My use for the city itself is permanent, but the inhabitants could be released."

"The two of us had a conversation on the Blessed Isle, once," I said. "You told me you'd put everyone inside my orphanage to the sword, if I didn't renounce my Name. Do you remember what I replied, that night?"

"That you would make a monument to ruin of me," Akua Sahelian said, and she sounded almost fond. "You refused me, naturally. Those, however, were forty lives. I hold over a hundred thousand of your countrymen in my palm now."

"You know that's not how that works," I serenely said. "I let one of your pack of vultures pull this on me once then every High Lord will threaten to start summoning demons in Callowan cities for leverage."

Diabolist cocked her head to the side.

"When we first met, you would have hesitated," she praised. "I must confess I rather enjoy the woman you've become, Catherine. You've been scoured of your former impurities."

"Spoken like someone I'm going to murder before the year is out," I said. "Is this the part where you tell me we're not so different, that we could work together? You burned that bridge when you let the demon loose, Akua."

"A blow meant to cripple you, that you dealt with in a way that demonstrated great aptitude," Diabolist said. "Had you not been able to weather the likes of it, we would not be speaking."

I blinked.

"You've never actually *admitted* to that before," I slowly said.

"There is a certain satisfaction in discarding the pretence," the dark-skinned beauty mused. "You should be aware by now I've never seriously attempted to take your life."

"You were never aiming to be Black's apprentice, I know," I flatly said. "Bit of a jump going from that to us being friendly, considering you did try to cripple me several times and are directly responsible for the death of both soldiers and innocents under my charge."

"The alternative to the posturing would have been standing against the Empress prematurely," she said. "We both know the outcome of such a trial. It was never personal, Catherine. While I do find you grating, you are not without redeeming qualities."

Aisha leaned in.

"She may very well mean what she says," the officer murmured. "While her actions are those of a foe by the customs of your people, to a Praesi allying with her would not be unthinkable should the rewards be sufficient."

I watched the Diabolist, that genuinely friendly visage she must have spent years perfecting. I was not looking at a person so much as a collection of cold ambitions that masqueraded as one.

"I'm being told you might mean that," I said. "But we understand each other, don't we Akua? You know what I think of your Great Game. You know better than to think I'm going to link hands with the likes of you, no matter what you offer."

I heard Adjutant silently return to the pavilion, coming to stand behind me.

"You speak so because you believe I am going to lose," Diabolist said. "That is not an unreasonable position."

"I *know* you're going to lose," I said. "You have a month before Liesse has to come down, or you have a hundred thousand rioters on your hands. And the moment you're grounded, I'll be leading the largest army since the Conquest to take your head."

"And so we touch upon the reason I requested the presence of the Hierophant," she said.

I glanced at Masego. He didn't react. I elbowed him.

"Is it over?" he asked.

"Pay attention," I chided. "She's got something she wants to say that concerns you."

He looked dubious, but his face turned to Akua.

"As the only son of Lord Warlock, I assume you are familiar with what the Calamities refer to as the 'Dark Day protocol'."

Masego frowned.

"I am," he said. "It's a classification for workings they use. The best way to describe them would be *kingdom-killers*. Uncle Amadeus has never lifted restriction on their use that I know of, though study is another matter."

"Twenty years ago," Diabolist said, "Lord Warlock comprehensively researched what I believe came to be called the Still Water project."

It was distressing the way Masego paused at that.

"That is under Imperial seal," he said. "Everyone involved was killed and their souls bound to prevent necromancy. Uncle said if it ever got out we could do that there would be a Crusade mobilized within the month."

"A trial was run," Akua said.

"In a closed pocket," Hierophant said and his voice shook. "You... You have a ritual that can – no a ritual would have been noticed. You have an *artefact* that allows you to scry other dimensions. Gods, the advances that could lead to. The Hells could be mapped with this. Arcadia, we *could learn the full boundaries of Creation*."

I'd never before seen him look hungry, desire twisting his features.

"It is currently in my possession," Diabolist said. "And could be made available for your study, should you choose neutrality in the coming conflict."

Yeah, I wasn't letting that go.

"It's yours after we kill her," I said. "Hierophant, focus. Still Water, what does it mean?"

"Father was trying to discover if necromantic state could be achieved almost entirely through alchemy with sorcery as only a trigger," Masego said. "After consuming sufficient amounts of a reagent humans can be turned into undead with a minor ritual, with exponential potential for number of affected as relative to expended power."

"That sounds like an undead plague," I frowned. "The Empire's used those on Callow before, they don't work. The House of Light always ends them in the crib."

"It is metamorphosis, Catherine, not a magical disease," he said impatiently. "Miraculous healing has limits. It can heal a sickness but not change the natural state of being of a human – reconnect a cut limb but not regrow it. The power of the priests would kill the undead, not cure them."

I breathed in sharply. Shit. If there was no cure and all that was needed was for people to imbibe the substance, then the only limit on that was the amount of reagents the Empire could afford – and Praes was very, very rich. *If they play it quiet enough, half of the Principate could be a shambling horde before they realize what's happening.* And Akua had implied she knew of this.

"The refugees," I said. "The people of Liesse. You fed them the substance."

"Our understanding of the process was incomplete," Diabolist conceded. "It took me several months instead of the theorized one to reach the ideal concentration. The process was accelerated when I held the only available source of water, of course. As you can see, it is temporary for you to have the largest army on the field. That can be remedied in the span of an hour should I wish it."

"I'm not sure I have the words to express how dire the consequences of that would be, for you," I quietly said.

"I would rather not employ these means myself," Akua easily said. "Yet you now understand I am not in nearly as desperate straits as you believed. Which is now I would now make you an offer."

My fingers clenched until the knuckles turned white.

"Would you like to rule Callow?" the Diabolist asked. "Truly rule it, I mean. Not whatever ramshackle arrangement the Empress promised you. You would be queen in truth."

"Under you," I said.

"Not a dishonourable state of affairs, as the rest of Calernia would be soon to follow," she said. "I do not care, Catherine, for the petty duties of running this continent so long as it bows to me. I understand, of course, that by the customs of your people I have caused personal offence. I would provide gift to even the balance. I am given to understand one of your companions, the Legate Nauk, was wounded beyond your means to heal. I will return him to fullness of health myself, as a gesture of good will. Truly, so long as you limit your ambitions to the bounds of Callow is there is no reason the two of us cannot find accord. You would find me a most tolerant ruler."

I closed my eyes, sought calm and found only Winter. A frozen landscape without end, reflecting the ragged edges of my anger in a sprawling hall of mirrors. The air turned cool. The wards around us shivered. *How many times am I going to have to betray you, Nauk?* But I had not traded him for a boon, and I would not trade him for an empire. Eyes opened, and the envoys ahead flinched.

"Here is my own offer, Akua Sahelian," I said softly. "Set Liesse down. Abandon everything, flee to Ashur and sell what you must to buy passage across the Tyrian Sea. If you do that, spare me the horror of bringing down everything you've ever built on your head, you'll keep your life. This I call fair bargain, and more than you deserve."

"I had hoped," Diabolist said, "that I would not need to break you before we came to an arrangement. If you march against me, terms will not be offered when next we meet. They will be *given*."

"I give you oath, Diabolist," I said and I hardly recognized my voice for it was a thing of ice and iron. "If you do this, there is no place in Creation or beyond that will safeguard you from me. Not Heavens or Hells, not even if every lord in Arcadia swears to you. The doom I promise you will have men trembling in a thousand years when they speak of Akua's Folly and the woe that came from it."

The Diabolist smiled tenderly, as if I had confessed my love for her.

"Oh, Catherine," she murmured. "I almost regret it, that this ends with you kneeling."

Before she'd finished the last word I had flipped the table and crossed the pavilion, sword in hand and shoved to the hilt through the mirror. Ice spread through it and it broke with a deafening crack, shattering in a hundred pieces of shining silver. I did not bother to look at the remaining envoy or her escort.

"If any of them move," I told Adjutant, "kill them all. I want them shackled and in a dark hole before a quarter hour's passed."

He nodded slowly as I strode out of the tent. Hierophant followed, panting as he tried to catch up.

"Catherine," he gasped. "Wait."

I turned to him, forcing calm.

"The array on Liesse," Masego said. "It's too large. The power of the entity she bound does not make sense if Still Water is her intent. She could achieve it with something a hundredth the size and a dozen mages."

I froze.

"This isn't it," I croaked.

Hierophant shook his head.

"She has yet to reveal her weapon," he said.

A city floating in the sky, a god stolen and bound, a hundred thousand men turned undead. All of this, and it was only the opening of the waltz.

It was time, I thought, for hard measures.

## Chapter 48: Interrogation

*"I was once told that character is what you are in the dark. I found, my dear Chancellor, that I was the dark."*

– Dread Emperor Sorcerous

"There," Hierophant said.

It had been a pleasant surprise to learn that Masego had not ignored the talks with Diabolist purely because the matters discussed bored him. He had, in fact, been tracking the other end of the scrying spell since its establishment. Though Akua had used relays to muddy the water, I doubted she'd seriously expected her work to fool the eyes of a Named mage. The implication there lay bare: it didn't matter if we knew where she was, because she was ready to pull the trigger at any time. On Still Water, and whatever else she had up her sleeve. The neatly



ordered lines of light in the air formed a broad map of Callow, though it ignored cities for geographical features. Studying it, I picked one of the stones Juniper used when planning operations and set it down on the earthly map I'd sent for.

"This looks accurate to you?" I said.

The Soninke did not turn, and I got the eerie impression he was looking with his glass eyes through the back of his head.

"Half an inch upwards," he said.

I adjusted and grimaced as he dismissed the spell.

"No way to tell if she's set down, is there?" I asked.

"She will have to, to use her array," Hierophant said. "On a working of this scale, the slightest imprecision would have massive repercussion. I've never heard of a flying fortress capable of remaining entirely still in the sky."

So this, I thought, was going to be our battlefield. Akua had brought Liesse in the heartlands of Callow, precisely at the intersection of three cities: Vale, Ankou and Southpool. All cities that had gone largely untouched by the Liesse Rebellion and what men were already beginning to call the Arcadian War. On one hand, that brought her within marching distance of the legions under the command of Marshal Grem One-Eye. On the other hand, those legions were posted there because they were in spitting distance of the border with the Principate. There was, I knew, no realistic way to keep anything that would go down there quiet abroad. Diaobolist, as was her habit, had begun to fuck us over from the very beginning. Black and Malicia had spies under every rock in this land, but not even that would be enough to keep the method of necromancy used here under wraps.

It'd taken another sit down with Masego to understand how much of problem it would be if Still Water got out. I knew there was something called Keter's Due that was one of the limits of sorcery, the amount of power that got wasted with every spell and ritual, and apparently the Due one was one of the reasons why large rituals were only ever used if you didn't mind wrecking wherever they took place – like, infamously, the Kingdom of the Dead. Warlock's horror project was bad news in part because most the heavy lifting was done through alchemy, with only the trigger being sorcery. It could be used again and again without any great resource investment save the reagents. Calling it world-shaking innovation would be stretching a bit, in my opinion, since there were still obvious limits on how it could be employed. If people didn't imbibe enough of the reagents, the ritual wouldn't do much at all, and after the initial use other nations would certainly start keeping an eye out for it.

It was still a brutal weapon, one that had the potential to wreck large swaths of territory if employed properly – which it would be, if the Empress and Black were the ones plotting the use. Given that the First Prince was already itching for a Crusade, there would be consequences when it got out. The best I could hope for was to slow the spread of information and destroy the proof. I knew better than to hope that would lead to more than a delay. Diabolist had just effectively ensured we'd be at war with the Principate within a few years, at a guess the moment they finished getting on war footing. Given the titanic size of Procer and what it would actually mean to have its full strength thrown at the Empire, I doubted Black would give them the time to gear up in peace. He'd strike first and strike hard, aiming to cripple them before they mustered their armies properly. *If they don't start the war, we will.* Dark as the thought was, I would prefer the latter. Better to fight on Proceran soil than Callowan.

I reached for the bottle and topped up my glass. I had no idea how long Diabolist would need to finish her array, assuming she hadn't already, and that meant the time scale of this campaign was still in the dark. If I took a few months to gather reinforcement, was I going to have to deal with the sky raining fire? On the other hand, with the army that stood on the other side, could I afford *not* to? Unless she'd gotten reinforcements since her scrap with the Princess of High Noon, Diabolist had only six thousand proper soldiers but twice that in undead and devils. Then she'd get the entire population of Liesse, of course, and she still had one 'greater devil'. For something to qualify as greater in the eyes of a Princess of Summer meant it wasn't to be taken lightly, by my reckoning. It would mean nothing to hit fast if my armies failed to take the city. *There are still so many unknowns*, I thought, and glanced as Masego made to leave.

"Stay," I said. "I need you for the coming conversation."

"Though my judgement is laudable, I have not much exercised it in matters of war," Hierophant said.

"This one's not about war, not exactly," I said. "I sent for Duchess Kegan. I want to know exactly what Diabolist got her hands on that has her so worried and what the consequences of killing it would be."

The blindfold creased with his brow.

"Deoraithe are notoriously secretive," he said.

"And it'll be the three of us in the tent alone," I grunted. "I already am compromising. I'd rather have Hakram and Juniper in here as well."

"And you believe she will see it this way?" the blind man asked, genuinely curious.

"Let's hope she's reasonable," I said.

The mage looked amused at that, for some reason, but he grabbed the seat at the edge of the table. It was meant for over a dozen, the same I used for staff meetings, and looked rather strange so empty when I'd grown used to it being full. I drank from my cup as Hierophant summoned the bottle to him and poured himself one as well. I raised an eyebrow.

"Would it really have been that much of an effort to get up?" I said.

"You sound like Father," he muttered.

Whatever I would have made of that – and already I had *ideas* – had to be set aside for the moment, as Kegan graced us with her presence. It would be revisited though, the grin I sent Masego's way promised as much.

"Your Grace," the Duchess greeted me, then grudgingly inclined her head at Masego. "Lord Hierophant."

"Duchess Kegan," I replied over the rim of my cup. "Please, sit."

The courtesies on her part were stiff, and I knew exactly why. Twenty thousand Deoraithe had marched out of Daoine, a quarter of them Watch, and now only fourteen thousand remained. Her casualties had the Battle of Four Armies and One had been relatively light, but Dormer had been bloody business. Made worse, I knew, by the fact that Juniper had refused her use of the Watch when she struggled against the Summer regulars in the outer city. Instead they had been sent to fight the Immortals, and courted disaster there as well. I'd yet to get a spoke report, but the written one I'd gotten my hands on said the Watch had been getting brutalized before Thief came to their aid by snatching the standard on that flank. Half the Watch had been buried, either here or in Arcadia. It was the kind of losses that would take a generation to recover from, and we hadn't even come in sight of Liesse yet. Kegan took a seat distant from both mine and Masego's, to my dark amusement. It was almost childish, the three of us sharing a table meant for four times our number as if there was nothing odd in it.

"Your messenger did not specify the reason for your summons, only that the matter was urgent," the Duchess said.

She eyed the bottle, but did not reach for it. I had no intention of wasting Vale summer wine on the likes of her, and so did not offer.

"We know where the Diabolist is," I said, and gestured at the table.

She glanced at it, eyes lingering on the stone I'd placed.

"A blunder on her part," the Deoraithe said. "You could easily muster forces from the adjoining cities without even use of portals. Orders through scrying would allow you to gather and arm men in great numbers."

"I'm considering my options," I said.

I balked at the idea of sending half-trained civilians into the den of madness Akua would have prepared for them, but I was not unaware I might not have a choice. What we had left might not be enough to deal with more than a hundred thousand undead, much less the horde of devils she was sure to have contracts for.

"That is why I called for you, as it happens," I continued. "The odds are already stark as is. We can't afford to go in blind."

The tan face of the aristocrat went blank.

"I have already shared with you what I can," she said.

I raised an eyebrow. She'd told me that whatever Akua had bound 'could be considered a deity of sort', which was actually less than what Masego had been able to tell me – and all *he* knew was second-hand from his father.

"Behavioural changes were observed in the Watch," Hierophant said. "Of this you have not spoken, or truly much at all."

Kegan's eyes went cold.

"Has your *esteemed* father not put enough of my people under the knife to discern some truths?" she said.

Ah, sarcasm. She should know better than to think that would work on Masego. He had a decent read on those he knew well, but strangers?

"No," Hierophant replied frankly. "He is under orders never to grab a member of the Watch without legal cause, which has been very difficult since the Conquest."

"How sad for him," Kegan replied blandly.

"That's very kind of you," Masego said, sounding surprised. "It has been very irritating to have such a fascinating mystery within reach but forbidden from study."

"Warlock's not the one asking you the question, Duchess," I said. "I am."

The woman's eyes returned to me.

"The terms of our treaty with the Tower place the affairs of internal rule within our sole purview," she said.

"And if the thing was still within your borders, I'd cheerfully pretend it didn't exist," I said. "It isn't. It's being used as fuel for whatever Diabolist means to throw at us, and I'm not taking a swing at that without a broad idea of what's waiting on the other side."

"The breach of terms was Praesi," Kegan stiffly said. "It is not for Daoine to pay the price for that treachery."

"Akua Sahelian has been attainted as rebel by the Empress," I sighed. "You know who stands for Praes, right now? I do. You know, the person trying to fix this fucking mess."

"A mess you have no small hand in making," the duchess coldly said. "Did you not personally petition the Court to have the Diabolist named governess of Liesse?"

"I was bound by oath to do as much," I reply, but it was a weak answer and I knew it.

It had occurred to me, of late, that it was hard to tell if I was the pillar propping up Callow or the stone around it's people's neck. I wasn't done losing sleep over that, but neither was I going to let it bind my hands when dealing with a woman actively refusing to inform me of a danger we both faced.

"And I am bound by duty not to speak of this matter," Kegan said.

I let out a long breath and calmly put my hand on the table. The other woman watched it, and her features loosened almost imperceptibly when she saw the wood had not fogged or frozen. She thought it meant I wasn't furious. *Wrong. It just means I've gotten back a sliver of control.*

"I've made a lot of oaths and promises, in the last few months," I calmly said. "Some pretty grandiose threats, too. I won't bother with that here, Kegan. I'll just put two truths in front of you. The first is this: to have a decent chance at victory, I need to know what I'm facing. The second is this: I do not need your consent to get an answer."

I could Speak, I could have Hierophant rip it out of her mind or half a dozen other ways. With ever month my arsenal grew, and I grew less reluctant to use it. I could use any of those tools and even make sure she wouldn't remember a bit of it when she left this tent. Masego had learned much from his work against fae in the south, when I sent him to use Summer against the Diabolist.

"You have made much of treating fairly," Kegan said, but I could see fear there.

"And I will again," I said. "I'll offer mercy whenever I can. Justice too, as much as it can be had -but never when the cost is defeat. That is my line in the sand. Cross it at your peril."

The duchess met my eyes, even afraid, and for that she won my respect. It would not stop me from asking Hierophant to carve open her mind, if I had to.

"A lesser evil is still an evil," she bitterly said.

"I prefer necessary to lesser," I said, "but will not quibble over the rest."

Kegan breathed out, and reached for the wine. She poured herself a glass and wet her lips before speaking.

"It is not a god in the way Praesi would know of it," she said. "It is a gestalt."

Masego gasped.

"Souls," he said.

Kegan nodded.

"Every single one of the People that have died since the elves took the Golden Bloom from us," she said. "Millions, by now."

"And the Watch is bound to them," I said.

"They borrow the strength of our ancestors, one day to take back our home," the duchess said.

"You forged a god," Hierophant said, and spoke with a touch of awe. "This might be the single greatest working of necromancy Creation has ever known. Unlike Keter it would *keep growing*. Every decade you can have more Watchmen, or stronger."

I had other worries.

"If Diabolist controls your... gestalt," I said. "Can she control the Watch through it?"

"The past rulers of Daoine had similar worries," Kegan said. "A degree of separation was created to prevent a Warlock from effecting this should they find out. It is one of the reasons the Watch has not been able to grow more numerous but not more powerful over the centuries. The number of oaths that can be taken is limited. The usurpation was still felt, however. It is quite unpleasant."

"You should have spoken of this to Father years ago," Hierophant began excitedly, "there are numerous theories that-"

I cut him off with a raised hand.

"Can it be destroyed?" I asked.

"Yes," she reluctantly said.

"And what would the consequences of that would be?" I pressed.

"I am unsure," she admitted, and I turned to Masego.

"You'd be destroying the gestalt, not the souls," Hierophant noted. "As individual entities they would go on existing, released from whatever binding kept them together."

I grimaced.

"That sounds bad," I said. "It would damage the surroundings, right?"

"Containing them in a location would be feasible, with the right set of wards," he said. "Otherwise, should they be unconstrained, I imagine over a third of Callow would be turned into a blasted, violently haunted wasteland. I'll need a direct look or more precise numbers to project the exact fallout."

"I have brought specialists to wrest back control from the Diabolist," the duchess said. "Preventing her from interfering with the process is the most salient issue."

Glass eyes turned to her.

"It find it unlikely," Hierophant said, "that Deoraithe mages could undo the work of a Named practitioner of Akua Sahelian's skill."

I drummed my fingers against the wood.

"Duchess, get your people talking with Hierophant," I ordered. "We'll see how feasible your way is. I'd much prefer it was. But if it isn't..."

I grimaced.

"Well, Diabolist put a sharper in the middle of her army," I said. "I'm not above lighting it to finish the war."

## **Chapter 49: Hearsay**

*"Truth is a lie grown old and beloved."*  
– Soninke saying

The woman sitting in my tent I had fully expected, but the fragrant pot of tea set on the table I had not. Not for the first time I wondered how deep the rabbit hole went: how deeply had the Empress infiltrated the Fifteenth, that she could see water boiled and a tea set put down in my own godsdamned tent? As for Malicia herself, I offered her a nod before plopping down in the seat across from hers. The meat-puppet of the woman who ruled about a quarter of the continent poured me a cup of pale steaming tea, adding two blots of sugar and a silver spoon to the saucer before handing it to me. I was long past being surprised at her knowing details about me, but that she'd taken the time to learn how I took my tea was a nice touch.

"How was your day, darling?" Her Dread Majesty Malicia, First of Her Name, asked me with a sweet smile.

I winced, well aware that she was putting forward that very domestic image purely to screw with me for her own entertainment. As long as she didn't start massaging the back of my neck I'd cope.

"Well, this afternoon I pretty much scared the Duchess of Daoine into telling me a secret older than the Kingdom of Callow," I said. "I put it under the seal by your authority too. No one but Masego and I are ever going to know the details."

I stirred the tea before putting down the spoon on the table – which even with my botched etiquette lessons I knew was quite unmannerly – and took a sip. Huh, tasted different than the Ashuran stuff. Closer to Aisha's brews, though the taste was clearer. The Empress smiled.

"Ah, hedging your bets," she said. "You do not want the knowledge in the Tower's records, lest it be misused decades from now."

Pretty much, yeah, though I refrained from agreeing out loud. I wasn't sure I'd trust Black with the knowledge that there was that kind of juicy leverage on Daoine up for grabs, much less whatever murderous clown might be succeeding the lot of us whenever our work inevitably caught up to us. Masego would keep quiet, I knew. He'd been raised to respect symbols like the Tower's seal and he wasn't exactly the gossiping type to start with. I doubted Kegan would trust the son of the Warlock to do anything at all, but she'd just have to deal with it. I'd needed Hierophant in the loop to have a chance of this not ending in the ruination of Callow. Which, in all fairness, it still might. One on one I'd bet on myself against Akua, but she'd had a long while to prepare. For a mage, especially one as powerful as her, that made a difference. Liesse was going to be the greatest slaughterhouse of my young but bloody tenure as the Squire.

"So," I said. "Not going to ask me what terms Diabolist offered?"



The Empress sipped at her own cup, taken plain.

"Shall I guess?" she said, amused. "The queenship of Callow, naturally. Anyone trying to turn you would begin with this. It would have to be paired with a threat that promises to either destroy this land or ruin it, lest you dismiss her from the onset."

Elegantly, Malicia tapped a finger against the table.

"She will have been serious in her attempt," the Empress assessed. "A personal touch as well, then. A full ritual to unshackle your former paramour, perhaps, or healing for your recently wounded legate. Her spies should be capable of sending word of that in time for the offer being made."

I drank deeper from the cup. She'd been right on the nose for all of it, not that I'd expected any less. Dread Empress Malicia had been doing what Akua was trying to for over forty years, better and against more dangerous opponents.

"She went for Nauk," I said. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you know all about Kilian."

"Did you really think you would be able to wield so much power in my name without your weaknesses being thoroughly investigated first, my dear?" the Empress chided. "If there were means available to remedy her state that did not break your principles, I would have seen it done already – if only to remove a way to pressure you."

So, confirmation even someone with Malicia's resources and frankly ludicrous sorcerous archives couldn't find a way to help Kilian without ritual sacrifice. I'd been considering asking a favour there to sidestep the issue entirely, and was almost relieved it wouldn't be possible. Owing a favour to the likes of the Empress was not something to undertake lightly. It left Warlock, maybe, but that wasn't much better. *And if I must make bargain with the Sovereign of the Red Skies, Nauk comes first.*

"I did not come to speak of the Diabolist, though I expect we shall," Malicia said. "I have news from the south."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Is Black finally done murdering his way to a settlement?" I asked. "The situation in Callow could use his special touch, I'll admit."

The Empress paused, and my eyes sharpened. I'd never seen her visibly choose her words before, but I was near certain that was happening before my eyes. *Shit. What went wrong?*

"Amadeus was defeated," Malicia said. "Though Procer has not spread its influence to the League, that achievement was not his doing. A Hierarch was elected even as Nicae fell to the Tyrant of Helike's armies."

"He *lost* to the White Knight?" I said. "Fucking Hells, I thought he was green. How did he manage that?"

"I am given to understand there was betrayal on Helike's part, but that the foremost architect was an old acquaintance of yours," the Empress said. "The Wandering Bard, under a different name."

I frowned.

"She was a pest," I said. "And dangerous, I won't say otherwise, but definitely not in the league you're describing. A second-stringer like the Bumbling Conjuror, with a sharp grasp on her powers and limitations."

"As of Amadeus' last report, 'Aoede of Nicae' has made it on the Red List," the Empress murmured. "You have not been introduced to it yet, I believe. It is a list of names circulated among the Eyes of the Empire, of individuals that must be assassinated whatever the cost should opportunity be presented. She shares the distinction only with Cordelia Hasenbach and Klaus Pappenheim, at the moment."

My tea was cooling, so I gulped down a mouthful as I marshalled my thoughts. Black had been sent to the Free Cities to make sure nothing happening there gave Procer and excuse to start a Crusade, and it looked like that had been accomplished even if not by his hands. It was, unfortunately, made moot by the fact that Diabolist had a bucket of red in hand and was determined to paint a big target all over the Empire's face.

"He's all right, though," I stated, almost a question.

I refused to believe the Empress would have been so casual about this if my teacher was dead. I had only a vague grasp on the relationship between those two, but there was a great deal of trust and affection there. Frankly, I would have believed they were a couple if Malicia wasn't strictly interested in tits and Black pretty much indifferent to anyone not called Ranger.

"He was severely beaten, but not wounded," the meat-puppet said. "I would not call him 'all right', regardless. Captain was killed fighting a heroine."

I let out a sharp breath. Fuck. I'd always liked Sabah. She'd been the most reasonable of the Calamities in a lot of ways, and ever since the day I'd met her she'd acted like some sort of giant warrior aunt to me. *And I knew her for two years and*

*change. The Calamities were together for over four decades. I'd only rarely seen them together, but they'd been a family. They'd be grieving her for years.*

"He must be wretched," I said.

"And coming north as quickly as he can as of a month ago, along with Warlock and Scribe," Malicia said. "Be warned, Catherine."

My fingers clenched.

"*Don't you fucking try that,*" I snarled. "He wouldn't hurt me. Not even at his worst."

The Empress looked at me, and for a heartbeat I forgot this was a body she possessed. The woman I'd seen on the throne that night had come again, cold empire made flesh.

"I love that man," Malicia said, and the calm of her voice could be called anything but savage, "in a way I doubt you will ever love anyone, Catherine Foundling. He has been part of my soul since we were children looking at the stars. Do not ever believe that whatever paltry affection you lay at his feet is but a pale shadow of mine."

I flinched.

"I have never seen him like this," the Empress said. "Whatever the Wandering Bard did, it wounded what is at the core of him. This goes deeper than pride or what he felt for Sabah – he is as a raw, bare nerve."

"So he'll go cold," I said. "I've seen him like that before. It's terrifying, but not dangerous to either of us."

"*Think, Catherine,*" the Empress coldly said. "For all that he arms himself in logic, underneath still lives the sixteen-year-old boy who watched Nefarious flee and felt only disgust. If he'd never been at the Fields..."

She shook her head.

"It doesn't matter," she dismissed. "Every Named is crystallized from a single moment and that was his. What you should worry of is that his judgement has been impaired. He will serve the sword to anything in Callow that he deems to threaten Praesi hegemony."

"All that's left is Diabolist," I said. "And he's welcome to wield a sword there, if he gets to her first."

"Be warned," Malicia repeated quietly.

The tone was solemn, and had me doubting. I actually hated her a little bit in that moment, because no matter if this was true or

not it remained that she had the ability to make me doubt one of the pillars my life relied on. That alone was enough to harden distrust, made worse by the awareness that I needed her. Her support and her help, so that what I meant for Callow was anything but failure.

"So there's a Hierarch," I said, bluntly changing the subject. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"The man bears it as a Name," the Empress said. "As did his sole predecessor. He is a career diplomat for Bellerophon, called Anaxares."

"Bellerophon's the easternmost city, right?" I frowned. "The one that elects its rulers."

Democracy, it was called. There was a part of that that appealed to me – letting people choose their own way – but I'd never really bought into the notion. People were dumb, broadly speaking, and mobs even dumber. For all that I'd acquired a distaste of nobility, filling a hall with drunk tradesmen and asking the lot of them to make laws was no way to rule a country. Someone had to hold the reins, or all you got was bickering and indecision. Just because I believe that place shouldn't be inherited didn't mean it should be carved up and handed off to a hundred thousand strangers out in the streets.

"The Hierarch was prisoner to the Tyrant of Helike since the beginning of the war in the south, and the Tyrant seems to have been instrumental in arranging his election," Malicia said. "We've yet to acquire a full profile on him, since infiltrating Bellerophon has always been... difficult. What little we've seen of him is puzzling. He seems aggressively opposed to taking any action at all in his function as head of the League."

"He wouldn't participate in a Crusade, then," I said.

"It seems unlikely," the Empress said. "I would not commit to an answer without deeper study."

"Good," I grunted. "If we don't have to worry about an army sailing up the Hwaerte, then I just need to put down Diabolist quickly and lock down the Vales hard enough Procer thinks twice about invading."

If the First Prince managed to rope in the Thalassocracy it was possible they'd try to land armies in Praes, but I actually rather hoped they did. That land was death on invaders. Between the Wasteland and the Hungering Sands it was more or less impossible for an army to live off the land there, and every major Praesi city was filled to the brim with nasty surprises for anyone meaning to try their walls. Even at the peak of the crusader kingdoms, the authority of the kings had not held

further than a few miles away from the cities they ruled. And even then they'd not conquered the whole of Praes. Wolof had badly broken the army trying to take it, and neither the Northern Steppes nor the Grey Eyries had ever come under crusader rule. If Cordelia Hasenbach tried to take Praes from the coast, she'd find the region a bottomless hole swallowing her men and coin. Crusades always ended when they got too costly, half a dozen failed runs at the Kingdom of the Dead had taught Calernia as much.

"And so we return to Akua Sahelian," the Empress said.

I grimaced.

"She got her hands on something called the Still Water project," I said. "I'm guessing you know what that is. I'll have a hard time ever forgetting."

Malicia sighed. It was, for her, an unusually human gesture.

"I told Wekesa the trials were a liability," she said. "But he was adamant. Argued it would revolutionize understanding of rituals."

"Did it?" I asked.

"In a manner of speaking," she conceded. "After I decreed the matter to be under seal, he largely abandoned the avenue of research. What he learned before that would allow us a fighting chance against the Dead King, should he ever wage war upon us."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And that's considered likely?"

"The Empire has been in conflict with the Kingdom of the Dead in past centuries," the Empress said.

"I'm pretty sure I'd remember that," I said. "That kind of mess would be worth a page in the history books."

"You will find almost no record of them," Malicia said ruefully. "An attentive historian can find a period of twenty-five years between the reigns of Dread Emperor Pernicious and Dread Empress Maleficent the Second that is unaccounted for. The three Secret Wars were waged through the Hells, a vanity project that was an attempt to seize the Dead King's infernal dominion. An invasion through a hellgate in Ater was so imminent after the third that the woman who would become Maleficent II called on a pair of demons to erase most of a Hell and the previous two decades with it."

I let out a low whistle. I disapproved of fucking with the fabric of Creation on a general basis, even the parts that smelled of

brimstone, but I had to admit that Maleficent had gone above and beyond in getting rid of the mess on her hands.

"Setting aside a revelation that will be haunting my nightmares in months to come," I said. "I have to ask – how many of those other continent-shaking horrors do you have locked up in the Tower? Because, without being arrogant, I think I can put the fear of the Gods in the Principate. But if the shoes keep dropping, they won't care about how many people I've stabbed. They'll be in for a death match."

"Four," Malicia said. "None of which are in danger of being revealed, as they never made it past the theoretical stage. Two inherited, two of Wekesa's making and dependant on him being alive."

Well, fuck me. There'd been a lot of nights lately where I had that sliver of doubt about whether I'd made the right choice in working within the Empire instead of against it. Wondering if by choosing to be a villain I'd ensured all the ruin that had come to Callow since. That put most of the doubts to rest, because I knew better than to believe Black would not have pulled the trigger if he was facing a victorious rebellion with foreign backing. My teacher had picked a soft embrace for Callow because he'd thought it to be the way to bring it into the Empire that would lead to the least resistance. I was not fool enough to delude myself into believing he would not turn to harsher means should it fail.

"I'll admit to some disquiet over that," I said. "It's not that Emperors as a rule are murderous pricks that would use those given half an excuse, but yes it is in fact exactly that."

"The resources involved are significant," the Empress said. "None of them are minor projects, and we both know how large developments such as these tend to end."

I didn't really consider 'don't worry about it, a hero would probably take care of that if it came down to it' to be a valid response, but I wasn't exactly in a position to pursue the subject at the moment. It might be worth bringing it with Black later. He had a bone-deep hatred of those kinds of weapons that might get my foot in the door as far as he was concerned, but that pragmatic streak cut both ways. He might want to keep those in the vault for a rainy day.

"There's going to be massive casualties," I told her after a moment. "She implied she can pull Still Water on the entirety of the people inside Liesse. That's at least a hundred thousand undead, and a battle won't clean all of those up. There'll be spill in the countryside."

"The Legions of Terror are versed in peacekeeping operations," the Empress noted. "And a visible common enemy has uses."

The Legions of Terror are versed in peacekeeping operations. Gods, there was a sentence to give a farmer the shivers.

"This is going to end up blamed on Praesi, Malicia," I bluntly said. "The Legions cleaning up afterwards won't win a lot of love when it comes from the massacre of a hundred thousand civilians at the hands of the Wasteland's favourite daughter."

"Public sentiment is already being prepared," the Empress said. "Your visibility of late is not without impact."

Ah. They were going to point at me and say here's the good girl, she beat the bad girl and would you look at that she's wearing our colours. Aren't you all glad the Tower's in charge? Lowered taxes for everyone. *I'm not sure that'll be enough, but if Procer comes knocking at the gate Callowans might just pick the devil they know. Especially if the devil just named one of their own vicequeen, with pretty knights riding at her back.* I was getting rather tired of the feeling my interlocutor had been three steps ahead of me the whole time, but I doubted it would end anytime soon.

"I have a hypothetical to speak of," I said.

"I am listening," Malicia said.

"Now, let's say there's this girl and she's not all that good at scheming," I said. "Hasn't got the knack for it. But she learned to read forces in movement, so to speak, and looking at the last year she noticed a few things."

The Empress studied me openly, and did not speak.

"The girl's been hacking away at moving targets this whole time and until recently never had time to breathe," I said. "But she does now, and trying to look at the year from a different seat she saw a few oddities."

I waved my wrist lazily to elaborate.

"Like Akua being able to amass the reagents for Still Water without calling down Hells on her head," I said. "Or importing so many little trinkets through southern Callow unimpeded. Now, this girl's people are green. No surprise they missed those things. But there's two people who should have been keeping an eye on the situation. One gets a pass, since he was away. The other, though? The other's absence of movement is *intriguing*."

"I am curious," Malicia said. "What do you believe this other would have to gain, by allowing the breadbasket of her empire to be devastated?"

"See, that's the part that got the girl at first," I said. "Then she thought, you know what's the problem with Callow? It's got all this farmland, but it's full of stubborn Callowans. It'd be much easier if a chunk of them were gone. You could have Praesi farm there instead."

The Empress said nothing.

"But then the girl thought that was too heavy-handed," I mused. "Measures like that could have been taken long ago and weren't. So what was to be gained, yeah? It occurred to her, then, that she was still thinking in the present. The wrong sort of game. Now, looking ahead, you know what might be useful for this other? Callow strong enough to fight the Principate, but too weak to make waves. And there's this image, too. Of the girl putting steel into Akua Sahelian's throat until she chokes on her blood, and how that'll make her popular with some people."

My eyes hardened.

"Puzzled her at first, since the other would lose a few feathers from the whole affair, but it makes a twisted sort of sense," I murmured. "If Callow's behind the girl and the girl is behind the Tower, well, all sort of troubles go away."

"And in this hypothetical, what would the girl say to the other?" Malicia asked.

"That now's not the time to bare knives," I said. "But that if anything like that was pulled again there would consequences, and that lately she'd gotten quite good at killing."

The Empress idly turned her cup.

"I believe this girl you speak misunderstands a few things of the other's methods," she said. "You see, unlike her fellow she does not believe a war with Procer is winnable. It is one of the few points on which they dissent, and she has gone to great lengths to delay and even attempt to prevent such a war from occurring."

*I wouldn't enable Diabolist if what she was cooking up brought a Crusade on our heads,* I took that to mean. Believable, though months of growing doubts weren't going to be quieted by a few offhand sentences spoken by one of the most skilful liars in Creation.

"That's a little worrying," I said. "Considering that war is around the corner."



"The man you spoke of spent a lifetime preparing for it," Malicia said. "It is, in his eyes, the culmination of everything he has ever done. To win it would validate all that he has fought for. One might say he is unable to envision this war *cannot* be won, for it would be contrary to who he is."

"And she thinks he's been blinded by that," I said. "I'm not sure it matters, at this point. The war's coming regardless."

"It's an interesting puzzle, isn't it?" she mused. "How does one win a war that one is fated to lose?"

"And there's an answer?" I asked.

Dread Empress Malicia smiled beautifully.

"Why, you never fight it at all."

## Chapter 50: Preparation

*"Doubt is the mother of failure."*

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

In the end, it took me three days to get eyes on Liesse. Marshal Grem One-Eye had sent out mages as soon as the city was glimpsed over the horizon, and my own mage lines kept coordinated with his own until we had four scrying links covering the major angles of the Diabolist's lair. What I saw did not bode well. The city had gone up with its walls largely intact and significant portions of the grounds under it and lost neither as it went down. The surrounding territory had been worked over with magic so that Liesse now stood atop a steep hill. Thousands were digging trenches and traps in the plains around it, working day and night without pause because they needed none. They were Callowans, but they were also dead. Without fanfare or a cackle, without a sound at all, Akua Sahelian had killed more of my people in a night than Black had throughout the entire Conquest. Men, women and children. The young and the old – Still Water drew no difference, and neither had she.

I'd been in a viciously dark mood since I'd gotten proof of it, and the mood had only gone darker when I'd seen what she was up to. Devil-summoning arrays had been carved on the walls, large siege weapons like those of the Legions placed onto bastions and additional wards were made every hour to fortify the city against magical interference. Hierophant had already confirmed I couldn't open a portal directly within the walls, not that I'd ever seriously thought there was a chance of it. The Summer fae would not have dithered attacking her for months if they'd had that as an available option, and I was still much less skilled than they at using fairy gates. I disliked wasting time in Dormer, but

Juniper had flatly informed me that after a brutal battle like the last one the men needed time to recoup and recuperate.

It wasn't just a matter of dealing with the wounded, though there'd been a great many of those. Our supplies had been running thin, and it was only Ratface's promised river barges coming through the city harbour filled with steel and goblin munitions that had the Legions in proper fighting fit again. Aisha had been a little less blunt in reminding me I'd had our troops going through forced marches and battles one after another for months, but no less firm. Even if it gave Akua time to dig in, the truth was that the Fifteenth simply hadn't been in a state to take the fight to her right away. As I saw to my house, Ranker and Kegan saw to theirs. The duchess kept to herself, but I saw almost too much of the old goblin for my tastes. It was her that suggested we had siege weapons of our own prepared in Laure and Southpool rather than rely on only our own, and when she began approaching the problem that way the Hellhound followed with aplomb.

For one, there were three legions in Holden under her mother that were sitting ducks unless I intervened. General Istrid had been sent there at my own order to prevent the Summer court from making a beachhead other than Dormer, and discharged that duty perfectly. But her twelve thousand men were now months away from the actual fighting, with a supply line that was chancy at best. Even if she began marching north immediately, she wouldn't be able to reach Liesse before the battle was weeks past. Could I afford to allow twelve thousand veteran legionaries to sit over a strategically useless position while I fought Akua? No, I could not. Not if the assault on the city was going to be as brutal as I suspected.

The only question then, was where I would transport them. The gates allowed me to significantly quicken the logistics of assembling a host that was spread throughout Callow, but they weren't a perfect solution. For one, I needed to be with the moving armies. And much more importantly, I couldn't actually use Arcadia as a staging ground. Whether the terms of my bargain with the fae court would protect my soldiers when they weren't actually travelling was irrelevant, since that wasn't how gates worked from my end: whenever I made an entrance, there was a corresponding exit. I couldn't actually get out of Arcadia by another place, as far as I knew, and our previous alternative of having Hierophant use fae nobles as portal-openers was no longer an option. Our prisoners had all been rather forcefully released by the Summer Queen when she still bore that name. And, last of all the weaknesses, going through Arcadia still took *time*. It as a shortcut, not fucking teleportation, which as probably for the best. Even with the mantle of a Duchess on my shoulders I was pretty sure attempting teleportation of any kind would flat-out kill me.

And so, sitting with Marshal Ranker and General Juniper, we planned out our little shell game. Akua had eyes on us, we on her. The side that would have the advantage when the battle began was the one who'd hide the knives better. Callow had already been put under martial law long before I went south, and as things stood I was both vicequeen and highest-ranked Named remaining of the region. I was also wielding my authority with the explicit backing of Her Dread Majesty – there was not a single in person in my home who had solid ground to stand on in refusing an order of mine. Would that I could enjoy that power even a little: I had wanted nothing more than to have it since the age of thirteen, when I'd made the decision to start saving up for the War College. I couldn't, not when the first order I gave was for immediate muster of the city guard in Southpool, Ankou and Vale. There was immediate pushback, argument from the Callowan governors I'd overseen the very appointment of that none of those men were trained soldiers.

I ordered for them to come anyway. Southpool was on the weak end of the scale, with only five thousand, but Ankou's city guard traditionally served as militia when Procer attacked the Vales and even though the city was smaller it boasted eight thousand and better equipped. Vale was the largest of the three, and though it put up only six thousand men I sent Grandmaster Talbot to squeeze blood out of that rock. Vale had always been the heart of central Callow, and though no great trade city as an agricultural one there were few equals to it on Calernia. There was wealth there, and though second-rate compared to the real wealthy cities of Callow it had historically been enough to support a great many soldiers and knights – some of the earliest chivalric orders had been founded there, they said. I left Talbot work his patriotic sorcery on the powerful of the city and another three thousand came out of that, including about a hundred knights. Gods, it was like those had been hiding under every rock. It was pleasing, in a way, that the governors were willing to fight for the people under their care when I would order those people to the grinder.

A shame I was not in a position to entertain their worries.

The place of muster for the city guards was set a little to the east of halfway between Southpool and Vale, which meant the Ankouans would have to pass south of Diabolist's lair and lose at least a week to it. Wouldn't matter, since I'd be busy ferrying Legions meanwhile. My options there had been more limited than I would have liked. The legions under Marshal Grem, for one, weren't going anywhere. I'd approached the subject of peeling off at least one, but the reports I'd been given in return were... stark. There'd been increasing skirmishes with the border principalities over the last months and Procer was massing soldiers in Bayeux. The Marshal's assessment was that if there was any large troop movement on the Empire's side, the Principate

would try an assault on the Red Flower Vales. Fucking First Prince. It didn't matter if she was bluffing us or not, since we couldn't afford to chance losing the narrow valleys that would give us a fighting chance against Proceran invasion. The Wasteland wasn't going to be any help either. Malicia's meat-puppet had made it clear the legions in her backyard needed to stay there, to keep the highborn in line and more importantly keep the fucking mess Akua's mother had made in Wolof contained.

Much as I would have liked another twelve thousand soldiers, I couldn't blame the Empress for not pulling them out when the alternative was devils spilling out in the Wasteland. The only reinforcements from the Legions at hand were the same I'd sent into Holden, and they were nothing to sneer at. I'd met all the generals in command there – Istrid, Sacker and Orim – and all three had been through the crucible that was the Conquest, but more importantly the civil war before it. Almost every one of my highest tier of commanders in this campaign would be familiar with Praesi war tactics of the kind Diabolist was likely to pull. That knowledge wasn't as reassuring to have on my side as another ten thousand soldiers, but it might end up saving more lives. Already I winced at the notion of sending guards into the kind of madness Akua would have prepared for them. There was no choice. The usual voice in the back of my head that insisted there had been and I had made it saw itself buried. I would allow myself doubt and grief when the wars was done. Until then, all they would so was slow me down in what had very clearly become a race of sorts.

Either Akua Sahelian would finish her scheme and break the Empire, or I'd mass enough strength to put her down.

There was a part of me, the same that had been taught by Black, that kept to the iron-clad belief that she would fail in the end. That whatever she was juggling would backfire on her, either because she'd but off more than she could chew or because I'd break her stride. But as the days passed, I had to concede it was a possibility I might fail. I couldn't quite manage to believe I would, but then I doubted any of the rulers Triumphant had crushed had thought they'd end up a note in the margins of history either. I knew better than most how dangerous Diabolist was, and how disparate the forces I was bringing against her was. There was advantage in that bastard mixture of Deoraithe, Callowans and Praesi I was leading. But there was weakness too. I failed, Hells even if I won but died winning... Well, I would be leaving behind me a mess that might be beyond salvaging. In rising to prominence I'd crossed a lot of lines and ripped open quite a few old wounds. None of that would be undone in the wake of my death, but I'd no longer be there to even try to guide the currents.

I wondered if Black had that same sense of cold fear, when he looked at the Empire. The ugly realization that a lot of what you'd built was dependent on you to remain functional, and that if some farmboy with a magic sword put six inches of steel through your throat it would bring ruin on hundreds of thousands. Recklessness, for all that it often cost me, had seen me win one uphill battle after another. Never without some of my blood spilled on the ground, but I'd forged victory out of being the only person in a fight willing to cross the line. Whether it was allowing my own death to get out of a Heaven-mandated defeat or lying my way to the contraptions of godhood, audacity had allowed me pull through situations that should have seen me dead or broken. But I could, I was coming to realize, no longer operate this way. Before all it took was for one gamble to fail, and the whole house of cards I had built around myself would come tumbling down. I'd gone out of my way to make myself, if not essential, then as close as anyone could be in Malicia's empire. But that cut both ways. *If I get myself killed, everything I bound to me suffers.*

I'd bound quite a few things to me, by now. Armies and institutions, even the very hierarchy that now ruled Callow. When you became someone of consequence, if only followed that your death would have those same consequences.

I'd never been good with fear. I'd always pushed through it by heading into the breach repeatedly until I stopped flinching, steeling myself by taking the weakness as a personal insult. But this... this was no longer dealing with a fear of heights by standing at a rooftop's edge the way I had when I was a girl. If I slipped and fell, Callow went up in flames. It wasn't a fear for my own death as much as fear of what it would mean, and I was finding it much harder to push down. That was the problem with learning the currents that guided an empire from behind the scenes – you could never *unsee* it, after. It was not a pleasant thing admit I knew no other way to fight. Black had once told me I needed to start thinking ahead if I did not forever want to be fighting to the tune of my opponents, and I liked to think I'd learned how. To an extent. But it was one thing to sit with the Empress and plan the unmaking of the Summer Court, another to plan the steps of a waltz with the Diabolist. Fae had rules they could not break. They were, in some ways, predictable.

All that Akua had binding her was having been raised with all the blind spots of the old breed of Praesi villainy, and those weaknesses were not meant for *villains* to exploit. One slip and it was all over. I'd long become used to gambling with my own life, and once when I had been younger and more ignorant even gambled with Callow's fate through my clash against the Lone Swordsman. I was older now, and if not wiser at least a great deal more aware. If I threw the dice and they came up wrong, then from Harrow to Dormer my people suffered for it. *If there is no*

*Named to use to bind Callow to the Empire, they start to use harsher methods.* I hated the thought, and the hesitation it brought with it. One of the old monsters who'd held the Tower had once said that the worst sin a villain could commit was to hesitate. She'd been right. I had won and kept winning because I had made a blade of temerity and struck out at my enemies with it. After a year of trying to keep Callow together in the face of slaughter and invasion, I wasn't certain how long I could keep doing that.

The thought came, unbidden, that this was not a coincidence. That Her Dread Majesty had uses for a hunting hound, but only so long as it could be leashed. And hadn't she done exactly that, by giving me the very same authority I asked for? I did not allow myself to think if it too much, not right now. I could spend months trying to discern the intent of the likes of the Empress and still end up grievously, hilariously wrong in my conclusions. *But.* I would, one of these days, sit with Hakram over a bottle and ponder this. Because it would have been arrogant to believe that the Empress had spent decades trying to suborn Callow with soft methods but would never try tactics that had proved so effective on me as well.

The itinerary that was ultimately settled on was simple. I would take Legate Hune and a detachment of two thousand into Arcadia, taking a fairy gate to Holden where we'd link up with General Istrid and her three legions. From there we'd take another gate to the muster point north of Vale where the guards from the adjoining cities had been ordered to gather. Then I'd make one last trip south, to hopefully shave off a few weeks from my host's march to the north to assemble with the rest. I'd always taken Nauk with me on journeys like this, and the Gallowborne as well. One was unconscious and more than halfway into the grave, and there remained only five of the cohort of two hundred that had once made up the other. Aisha had already suggested I disband them and assemble another retinue, but I'd refused. They'd died for me, John and his men. I would not spit on that by replacing them before the moon had even finished waxing.

"Senior Mage Kilian will have to remain with the Fifteenth," Juniper said, "but her second should go with you. I want our own mages on the ground, to keep scrying in our house."

"We have to assume Diabolist can listen in on all of those," I grunted. "The Empress certainly can."

"Ratface made his own codes that differ from Legion protocols," Aisha said. "I would think that our conversations, at least, will be hard for her people to decipher."

"She'll still be expecting most our troop movements," I said. "The Callowans I ordered to muster were warned she might make a sortie, but that only takes us so far."

"I am not certain she will," Juniper growled. "There would be obvious benefits to hitting our forces before they're gathered, but the heart of her strategy remains to defend Liesse until she can deploy her ritual. She might not want to take the risk, considering you can pop out of Arcadia at any time to hit the city."

"Assuming she can't track me when I leave Creation," I said. "We don't know that she can't."

"I would not plan strategy around the assumption," the Hellhound conceded. "But overestimating an opponent is just as dangerous as the opposite. If we are too careful to guard against means she does not have, we uselessly limit ourselves."

I sighed.

"Yeah, true enough," I said. "Pinpointing exactly what she can do has proved to be something a problem, but at the end of the day it doesn't matter that much. If we're too slow we're fucked anyway."

Juniper rasped out a laugh.

"Won't be the first time we fight against the hours as well as the enemy," she said. "I doubt it will be the last. You leave with dawn?"

"That's the plan," I said, and turned to Hune. "Your people will be ready?"

"Orders were already given," the ogre replied.

I looked away quickly, knowing if I kept staring anger would well up again. I had axes to grind with Hune, though I'd forced myself to keep my mouth shut about it. She'd done nothing that was against regulations, or outside her authority. Didn't make me any happier about it.

"Dismissed, then," Juniper grunted. "Catherine, a word?"

This hadn't been an official staff meeting, and so there were only four of us in the command tent. Aisha gave my general a warning look before following the ogre out.

"I'm listening," I told the orc.

"What the fuck is your problem?" she bluntly said. "You've been treating Hune like she ate your horse ever since Dormer. If you have something to say, say it. I'm her commanding officer."

My eyes hardened.

"You don't want to knock on this door, Hellhound," I warned.

"I just did, Foundling," she growled. "Out with it."

I'd gained enough control that the wood under my fingers did not freeze, but not enough it didn't fog as the temperature cooled.

"We had two trump cards to play, when taking a swing at the upper city," I said flatly. "The Watch and the knights. She sent both to the flanks against the Immortals instead bolstering my own push."

Juniper eyed me in silence.

"I get one," I said. "The Immortals were taking their tool. But if the knights had backed me, Nauk would be awake right now."

The Hellhound's lips curled into a snarl.

"If you were an orc, you'd be on the floor bleeding from the mouth right now," Juniper said, tone eerily calm. "And if you say anything like that ever again, I'll resign my commission."

My fingers clenched.

"Explain," I said through gritted teeth.

"She made a call," the Hellhound said. "As commander on the field. She did not do it lightly, or with unsound reasons. Just because you're angry Nauk got wounded does not give you the right to treat her this way. She isn't your friend, Catherine. She is *an officer in the Legions of Terror*."

"I took four hundred men when I advanced," I said. "You know how many came back."

"And she saved twice that many by sending our heaviest hitters against the Immortals," Juniper barked. "She made a tactical decision. It was the *right* decision, and I would have made the same. You had four Named with you, one way or another you were getting through. The others were expendable."

Juniper rose to her feet and paused when she passed me by, laying a hand on my shoulder.

"It's good," she said gruffly. "That you care. The Empress wouldn't. But you need to harden the fuck up, Catherine. We'll both have a lot of dead friends before this is over."

She left me to ponder that in the silent tent, eyes closed. Callowans had a lot of songs about the glory and righteousness of sacrificing yourself for the kingdom. I knew quite a few. None of them spoke of sacrificing those you loved though.

As always, the songs were thin gilding over the ugly truths of what I'd have to do.



## Chapter 51: Overlooked

*"It is ever the temptation of chroniclers to ascribe great failures to a single turning point, a flaw revealed or enemy virtue displayed. This simplification of history ignores the starker truth of all great enterprises, that in the end though all leaders are captains of a ship they rule neither wind nor tide. Failure and victory are the collection of choices small and great, shaped by perspectives of the myriad making them."*

-Extract from 'The Ruin of Empire, or, a Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

The fairy gate had opened half a mile away from the outskirts of Dormer, and that was where the two thousand legionaries of the Fifteenth made camp. It had taken us a week of marching through Arcadia to cross what was essentially the full breadth of Callow, not a fae in sight. I was still only beginning to grasp the full implications of what the boon I'd obtained from the fae royals meant for warfare in Calernia. So far I'd only used the fairy gates to move quicker within the bounds of Callow, but that was a self-imposed limitation. With Hierophant to chart me a path, I could feasibly muster an army in Marchford and have it pop out in front of the Principate's capital bristling with steel. Keeping an army in the middle of enemy territory supplied without turning to banditry would be near impossible, but what did it matter? I could leave the same way I'd come when my foodstuffs ran out. If the Red Flower Vales could be kept in Imperial hands, I could strike at Proceran territory with impunity while the First Princes' army were stuck besieging one of the most heavily fortified borders on the continent.

It was enough to have me shiver. There was precedent for the kind of power I wielded as the last Duchess of Winter, villains and heroes alike that had shown a capacity for destruction just as great. The gates, though? I couldn't think of one.

The Fifteenth had returned midmorning to Creation and I'd wasted no time in arranging matters with General Istrid. Juniper's mother had always been my favourite of the Praesi commanders in Callow. Within moments of our first meeting, two years ago, she'd expressed the opinion that Governor Mazus had been in need of a good hanging. Always a way to get on my good side, that. She wasn't much like her daughter, aside from the rough manners that were so common with orcs. If anything, she reminded me of Nauk – or the other way around, since I'd become acquainted with her first. She rode out to meet me on one of the great wolves that her people used as mounts, meeting me halfway to Holden. She gave warm welcome, though not without some grousing.

"You sent us across the country from the real fight, Squire," she growled after clapping my back.

Before I'd stolen my mantle, Named or not it would have jostled me. The woman had ferocious strength still, for one in her fifties.

"Needed you to herd them towards me, general," I replied. "Otherwise the front would have spilled across the south, and there was no putting that genie back in the lamp when it got loose."

"Sacker says the same thing," General Istrid said, visibly disgruntled. "A real shame. I won't ever get a good crack at the fairies, with that peace you shoved down their throats. At least we get a turn in the dance with the Diabolist."

"I won't say she's more dangerous than a pair of literal gods," I said, "but we're in for a rough month. You heard about the necromantic ritual?"

The exact nature of Still Water was still under Imperial seal, so the official story was that Akua had used some kind of ancient ritual to turn the entire city into undead. Considering the trove of horrors that still lay dormant in the Wasteland no one had questioned it too much, but I was aware it was only a matter of time until the truth of it trickled out.

"They're supposed to be high-grade undead, right?" she growled. "That's fucked. Skeletons and zombies need a necromancer guiding them to be a threat, but a hundred thousand bloody ghouls aren't something to sneer at."

"My caster tells me they're closer to the kind of undead the Dead King uses for officers," I told her. "We're calling them wights."

"The highborn twit should have paid closer attention to her history lessons," the orc laughed. "We proved that dead men and household troops are no match for Legion steel when we put the Empress on the throne."

There was truth in that, I felt, but also dangerous assumption. As far as I knew there'd been no battle of the scale of the one looming ahead during the Praesi civil war. Akua would have at a hundred thousand wights and six thousand living under her command, by our estimates, and the forces I was gathering would be a little over sixty thousand. Even during the Conquest armies that size hadn't been fielded in the same theatre, and for good reason. It was going to evaporate at least half the Imperial treasury to keep that many people fed and armed, and the aftermath was likely to turn a chunk of the Empires' breadbasket into wasteland. Nations fought with smaller hosts for a reason, even when they could muster great ones. The ride to Holden was spent recounting the Arcadian campaign at the general's demand, until I stood in council with the other two generals in the city. Orim the Grim and General Sacker were significantly less friendly

in the manners, though never actually impolite. Sacker did have that sharp goblin sardonic turn of phrase, but refrained from verbally pulling my pigtails the way she had on our first meeting.

I'd risen in rank quite a bit since then.

General Istrid had begun preparations for a march the moment my mages had scried hers, and I was rather pleased to hear the twelve thousand legionaries would be ready to leave come dawn. There was a certain pleasure to working with veterans knowing their way around a war. The Fifteenth's officers were getting there, but my legion was not a well-oiled machine yet. Part of that was on me, I knew. Even after the brutal casualties we'd taken in Arcadia and Dormer, the Fifteenth was still twice the size of any other legion and severely lacking mages. It was a rare month I did not thank the Gods for granting me both Ratface and the inclination to not look too closely at how he kept us supplied. Even Juniper had ceased slapping his fingers when he bent the rules a little, using the fact I'd effectively suborned the Guild of Smugglers to him as an excuse to wash her hands of the matter. It was not the place of an Imperial general, she said, to meddle in civil affairs. A little rich of her to say considering Marshal Ranker used to run Denier through the governor, but in theory it was supposed to be true.

I rode back to camp a few hours before sundown, declining the offer of a roof over my head in the city in favour of sticking with my men. I was still chewing on the conversation I'd had with Juniper before leaving. That Hune had made the right call, even if it had seen one of the few people I considered a friend halfway to the grave. Even if it had led to the Gallowborne being all but wiped out. The ogre legate was the only one of my senior officers I'd never truly reached out to. I hadn't made a lot of mystery about that, it must be said. When I'd first crossed the Empress by resurrecting a knightly order, she'd not been one of the people I gathered to tell. The Hellhound had objected back then as well, though I'd dismissed her words by saying I did not trust her the way I did others. Nauk, I recalled grimly, had been the very example I used. It might have been a mistake, I now thought. By visibly keeping Hune out of my 'inner circle' even though she was the second highest officer in the Fifteenth, I was making a self-fulfilling prophecy. Trust freely granted, in my experience, had a way of making people trustworthy. Of making them want to live up to that trust. I'd never attempted that with the legate.

It might not be too late to rectify that mistake, though. I still didn't like the call she'd made, I admitted to myself. But it was a dislike that was borne of reasons personal. *I do not have a monopoly on ruthlessness employed to save lives.* I'd raised the Fifteenth out of people I knew, had shared struggles with, and

they had since the beginning been given a measure of my trust. Hakram, Nauk, Ratface, Pickler, Robber. Even Juniper and Aisha, who had been opponents in the College but ones I respected. Hune had been brought in at the Hellhound's word and so never fully welcomed into that fold. It was part of a larger flaw in the way I did things, one the Empress had already warned me against: I rarely gave power to those I did not personally know and like. It was telling, perhaps, that Anne Kendal and Juniper were respectively the effective ruler of Callow and the commander of the largest military force within its borders. But I could not continue along these lines if I wanted my homeland to ever climb out of the hole. No matter how skilled the few I fully trusted were, they were not enough to form the ruling class of an entire kingdom. I shook myself out of the thoughts and sought Hune instead of continuing down the spiral and of excuses and recriminations.

The ogre wasn't with her officers. I found her at the edge of the camp, tucked away between two low hills and kneeling on the ground. Even like that she still towered several feet above me. I remained at a distance, though when I saw her lips move I sharpened my hearing to listen in. I'd had a casual disregard for other people's privacy even before I began employing spies. Pouring wine into a wooden bowl, she murmured to herself.

"O Faceless Gods, I give you thanks," the legate said. "For crossing survived and refuge found, for the breaking of the chains of men."

Breaking a small loaf of black bread with fingers large as sausages, Hune crushed it into crumbs she dispersed next to the bowl. Crossing survived, huh. I knew ogres were not native to Calernia. They'd been brought over as slaves by the Miezans, and ended up joining the Dread Empire when the first Maleficent founded it in exchange for land to live on.

"Neither poor nor rich, neither free nor bound," she murmured. "For the promise made to our ancestors, I offer bread and wine."

My brows creased when I saw the crumbs rot and the wine turn to vinegar. Hune was not a mage. No ogres were, they could not be born with the gift. This was the closest to the miraculous powers wielded by priests I had seen on the Empire's side. I knew there were cults in the Empire that sacrificed to the Gods Below in exchange for powers, but I'd never actually seen the Hellgods extend their hand to Creation before. It was chilling to watch, light as their touch had been. *A reminder there's more than one side of the old war looking at us.* The ogre emptied the bowl onto the grass and brushed her hands clean, picking up the empty wineskin before rising back to her feet. She did not seem all that surprised to see me. Ogres, as far as I knew, did not have senses better than a human's. *She might just have been expecting*

me. Reaching me in a few strides, Hune lowered her massive torso in a bow.

"Lady Squire," she said.

"Legate," I replied. "Didn't take you for the pious type."

Her face did not react, neither irritated nor amused.

"I am not Praesi," she said. "My people have their own ways."

"So I see," I said. "I'll admit to some ignorance on the subject. Never found a lot of books written about ogres the way there are about orcs and goblins."

Hune studied me calmly.

"We are not numerous enough to merit scholarly attention," she said. "Are you seeking reports, ma'am? I gave instruction to my commanders to have them prepared, but I remember the details if you would prefer them spoken."

"No, your officers already have me in the loop," I awkwardly said. "They're, uh, quite thorough. The precision of it will shave a few hours off Ratface's workload when we link up."

"I am sure your words will please them," the ogre said. "How may I offer service?"

I was honestly unsure if she was politely putting me off or not. There'd been some people currying favour with me when the Fifteenth was founded, before Juniper had put her foot down. Even after, though, it was rare for people *not* to lean into an opportunity to talk with me when they could. I left matters of promotion to the Hellhound without meddling, but I was still arguably one of the ten most influential people within the Empire. I was a little at a loss at how to deal with whatever this was. I wondered if the Empress had felt the same, when she'd summoned me to the Tower for audience and I'd bluntly pushed through the small talk.

"Sit with me for a while," I finally said. "If you've no pressing duties."

"I can spare some time," Hune said, her tone hinting at neither displeasure nor expectation.

I ended up with my legs going down the slope, thinking of how ridiculous we must look from a distance. Even with my plate making me seem larger, it would take ten of me put together to even remotely rival the legate in mass. I ran a hand through my hair, wondering exactly how I should go about this. It'd been easier, with the others.

"Are we to revise the command decisions I made in Dormer, my lady?" the ogre broke in while I was still debating.

Ah. She'd picked up on that, had she. Hard to play coy about displeasure when mine literally lowered the temperature.

"No," I said. "It's been pointed out to me that my objections were personal. Childish, arguably. I apologize for how I acted."

"You were not impolite or unprofessional," the legate said. "Even if you had been, you are Named. It is your prerogative to speak as you wish."

"Doesn't mean I should," I replied. "So have the apology anyway."

"There is nothing to forgive," Hune said calmly. "Was there anything else?"

I turned to her and studied her face. There was something brutish about the ogres looked, the way their features were slightly broader than a human's would be if they were the same size. It made them look a little slow, but there was nothing dim about those deep and dark-set eyes meeting mine.

"You don't like me very much, do you Hune?" I asked.

The ogre's face shuttered.

"I am an officer in the Legions of Terror, under your command," she said. "If my demeanour offended you in any way, I apologize and stand willing for any punishment you deem fit."

*Catherine Foundling*, I thought ruefully, *charmer of the year*.

"It's not a crime to dislike me," I said. "And I'm not offended. I'm honestly surprised at how well along I've gotten with the people around me. I wasn't exactly the most popular girl at the orphanage."

"You are apprentice to the Carrion Lord, named Vicequeen of Callow by Her Dread Majesty," the ogre said woodenly. "Praises are your due."

"I'm not all that interested in praises," I said. "But I'd like to know what... this is about."

I waved my hand vaguely. There was a flicker of irritation in her eyes, but I couldn't call it a victory. It was too shallow. The kind of irritation you had for a fly buzzing in your ear, not something I could use to bridge a gap.

"Ma'am, I am your subordinate," Hune said. "This is unnecessary."

And that was the heart of it, wasn't it? I didn't consider my people to be subordinates, or at least not just that. They were the people I drank and laughed with, the people I shared a fire with. There'd been less of that since I'd begun gathering Named around me, it was true. But I'd not allowed those relationships to go fallow either.

"I ask more of my officers than others do of their own," I said. "I try to give more as well."

"We," the ogre said bluntly, "are not equals. You hold power of life and death over everyone in the Empire, save a hallowed few. This pretence, my lady, is tedious."

"So this is about power," I said.

The sigh the legate let out was cavernous. I was pretty sure a single one of her lungs was the size of my entire torso. *Should have done this when it was dark out*, I mused half-seriously. *Seems to work better that way.*

"Is this an order?" Hune asked.

I nodded. I would have preferred not to make it one, but evidently that wasn't an option.

"Then with your permission, I will speak frankly," the legate said. "You are *dangerous*."

"Usually when people call me that they mean it as a compliment," I said. "I'm getting the feeling that's not the case here."

"The treaty with the Tower that granted us the Hall of Skulls and adjacent lands comes with mandatory service in the Legions," the ogre said. "There has not been a war since the Declaration where my people did not fight and die."

"I'm not unfamiliar with being on the wrong side of Praesi rule," I said.

"With all due respect, ma'am, that is untrue," Hune said. "You were born in the wealthiest city of the Empire's breadbasket and raised by an institution whose education is on par with that of lesser nobility."

"The orphanage saw lean month toos, Hune," I said. "We had Governor Mazus running the city for years before he got the noose."

"Every month, one of my people is murdered and drained of blood after coming too close to a lord's border," Hune said. "When the Green Stretch has a bad year, families sign themselves into servitude to avoid shortages. The Reforms barely lowered the amount of warriors that must be provided for service. We are

strong enough to be of use and too few to be worth appeasing. Callowans hang when they rebel or resist, ma'am. We earn death by *existing*."

"That can be changed," I said. "Hune, none of this is set in stone. It's not inevitable. It only works as long as we *let it*."

"And speaking words such as these, you have raised a host that answers to you before the Tower," the ogre said. "You promised freedom to the greenskins, insurgence to the many colours of men. And yet two things you have brought in fact: ever greater titles to you, and war wherever you tread."

"Because it's working," I replied bluntly. "There's opposition because we're gaining ground. We push hard enough and it'll break. We're not going against infinite strength. At some point they have to bend or lose."

"That may be," Hune said. "Perhaps you will deliver all you have sworn. But you are not the first silvertongued monster birthed by Praes. We have seen them come and go, and what has changed? In the end all of them smile, and ask us to die in their wars."

"I'm not asking you to die," I said. "I'm asking you to fight. If not for me, then at least for something you want. To do more than just... linger."

"We fought heroes," the legate said. "Then devils. Then the courts of the fae. Now we march against a madwoman of the old way. What meaning have any of these to me? I took oath, and will serve in the Fifteenth until I die or my term ends. But you ask me to bleed for strangers and thank you for it. That is not the due of a soldier. It is the due of a servant."

"I don't want servants, Hune," I said sharply. "I want comrades."

"Servants are what you have, my lady," the ogre said. "Your causes are their causes. You are Named, and so this is only natural. But I took oath to the Legions of Terror and not the army of House Foundling."

"I'm not asking you to commit treason," I said.

"We are riding with knights," she replied bluntly. "Half the Fifteenth is Callowan. You strong-armed the Dread Empress into naming you ruler of this land. Do not misunderstand me, Lady Foundling, I wish you well in these ventures. The world may be better for your victory, should it come."

Her dark eyes narrowed.

"But I will not die for another woman's dream," Hune said.

Slowly, she rose to her feet.



"I apologize for any offence I have given," the ogre said. "May I be dismissed?"

I bit my tongue and nodded. I watched the legate stride away and passed a hand through my hair.

So much for mending that bridge.

## Chapter 52: Tensile

*"What cannot bend is fated to break."*

– Taghreb saying

I wouldn't say aragh had grown on me, but it was the most common of the strong stuff that was peddled among legionaries. That had always been a source of wonder to me, that men and women who already carried so much weight over so many miles would still find it in them to slip a bottle of drink somewhere in there. Booze always found a way, didn't it? I hadn't asked Ratface to get me one, but it had magically appeared in my quarters after I'd gotten paring knives to stop disappearing from our supplies. My quartermaster was a tricky bastard with many an axe to grind, but it was little things like this that endeared him so much to me. Trust a Praesi to understand sometimes after a shit day you could need something a little stronger than wine. I poured myself a finger's worth in a silver goblet that Robber's men had 'found' back in Arcadia, aware I'd be going through at least a third of that bottle but unwilling to actually pour myself a full glass. It would have felt like to blunt an admission. I knocked it back and let out a groan at the the fire going down my throat, shaking my hair.

"Gods, that would outright kill a child," I rasped out. "Should I pour you one as well?"

Thief was pouting when she came into sight, going from not to there in a heartbeat's span. She sat astride the table, leather creaking on wood, and presented a golden chalice. I looked closer at it. Those were bells engraved on the side, weren't they? The heraldry of House Fairfax.

"Did you steal this in Laure?" I asked. "From my own treasury?"

"Stolen?" she said. "How dare you, sir. This was bestowed upon me by the Vicequeen of Callow herself, for services rendered."

"I paid upfront, actually," I grunted, but I poured and the aragh sloshed in her ill-gotten goods. "Orphanage never covered how to negotiate with thieves, which in retrospective is an oversight on Black's part."

Thief tried the liquor and grimaced, coughing.

"You drink this?" she croaked. *"On purpose?"*

"You get used to it," I lied.

The look she shot me was more than a little sceptical, but she got down her second swallow without her windpipe rebelling. I leaned back into my chair and granted myself a second finger's worth.

"How do you do it, anyway?" Thief asked. "Tell when I'm there. I was under cover of an aspect, and I've stood inches away from men in broad daylight without them batting an eye."

"I guess you could call it a Name trick," I said. "You never had a teacher, did you?"

"Not one Named," Thief frowned.

"Then I will share my hard-earned knowledge with you," I affably said. "You know how when you came into your Name there was this set of instincts just under your skin?"

The brown-haired woman cocked her head to the side.

"It felt more like a hand guiding mine," she said.

"Close enough," I said. "When you're about to get wounded or killed, you're going to get a tingle just like it."

She nodded slowly.

"I had no intention of striking you," she pointed out.

"Yeah, but you were looking at me," I said. "It does the same thing just... fainter. Black had people following for weeks back in Ater until I learned to pick up on it."

"Then if I moved without looking?" she said.

"Probably wouldn't be able to tell you're there at all," I said. "I didn't get the impression this was common knowledge, anyway. I doubt most Named we'll face will know the trick."

Thief finished her chalice and presented it for filling. Feeling magnanimous, I deigned to comply.

"Are you sure you should have told me that?" Thief asked suddenly. "If I turned on you, this could allow me to land my first strike unseen."

I took another mouthful of aragh, the roughness of the drink now beginning to be replaced by a vague sense of warmth across my chest. I waved lazily.

"Will you?" I asked instead of replying. "Turn on me?"

"If I deem it necessary," Thief said, and for all that she spoke nonchalantly her eyes were serious.

"You say that like it's a rare thing," I told her. "You think Masego obeys my every order? Gods, let's not even talk about Archer. Even my soldiers have lines in the sand they won't follow me past."

"You did not mention Adjutant," the other Callowan said.

"Hakram's the only person in this misbegotten world I trust unconditionally," I replied, perhaps too honestly. "If he turns on me, I'm fucked regardless. No point in worrying about it."

"He does more than you know," Thief said.

"That's what trust is," I said. "Not *needing* to know what he does. I'm guessing the two of you had an unpleasant conversation at some point. Is there anything you want to bring to me? I'll listen if there is."

She studied me for a while, then shook her head.

"Nothing I can't handle," she said.

I raised my cup in a toast, then polished off the remainder.

"So what do you have for me?" I asked.

"Less than you want," she shrugged. "There's twelve thousand of them, I only had time to have a look at the upper officers."

"And?" I prompted.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, as far as I can tell," Thief said. "If there are planted commands they are too subtle for my senses. I have difficulty feeling sorcery aside from wards, so it's possible."

"I hate dealing with Akua," I sighed. "The bag of tricks she inherited is a bitch to handle."

"I'm unsure why you would believe these legions would be her target," she said. "Did you not send them away from the front?"

"She had to know I'd be pulling together all the forces I can before taking a swing at her," I replied. "Istrid's legions are going to be the core of our offensive against Liesse. If they break halfway through the assault we'll be in deep trouble."

"The Fifteenth still seems a better opportunity," Thief noted. "It was raised recently and has a reputation for battlefield promotions."

"The Fifteenth has been under Masego's eyes for over a year," I said. "She tries to enchant one of my senior officers and Hierophant will catch it. These three legions have been out of my sight for months."

"And you believe she'll have agents somewhere in them?" Thief said.

"I *know* she does," I grunted. "That's not even up for debate, it's the base for half the plays I've seen her pull over the years."

I filled my cup again, then hers when she hinted at desire for a top-off.

"Diabolist has been too... open," I said. "She's a chip off the old tyrannical block, I won't deny that, but Akua's wheelhouse has always been the indirect. The massive army of undead, whatever traps she cooked up around Liesse – those are dangerous, but they're not the only arrows in her quiver. They're blunt instruments when she's a girl with a thing for daggers."

"She spent months preparing for the ritual in the city," Thief said. "I would look there for her sharpest blade."

I drank and grimaced, though this once not because of the aragh.

"That's been worrying me as well," I said. "I mean, I'd have to be insane not to worry about a fucking ritual involving centuries of accumulated souls, but there's more than that. Diabolist thinks what she's prepared is going to put her on top of the pecking order, and she may have blinders but she's not *stupid*."

"I don't follow," the dark-haired-woman admitted.

"Think of it this way," I said. "Akua has a large army and backers in the Wasteland, but not enough to handle the Empire at full tilt. Say we march up to Liesse, she pulls down the sky on our heads and our entire force is annihilated. She still loses, because she's fresh out of a god and the Empire's still standing. Weakened, sure, but there's other armies it can field and other commanders too. She's not winning, she's delaying a defeat."

Thief's eyes narrowed.

"You're implying she can use the ritual more than once," she said.

"Pretty much," I said. "This doesn't make sense otherwise. And isn't that the stuff of nightmares? Either the ritual works once

but it has a permanent effect – but she didn't rant about ascending to godhood when we talked, so I don't like the odds – or whatever she can pull, she can several times. And it won't be just a few either. If I die she's up against Black, and he's not the kind of man who shies away from a long slugging match."

"Great sorcery always comes at a cost," Thief said, but there was unease on her face.

"She won't care, if she's not the one paying," I said. "We'll have to go into that fight facing the possibility she has both her current armies and a deployable catastrophe in her pocket. We can't face that and win with traitors in the ranks, Thief. It'll be a razor's edge as is."

My fellow Callowan looked grim.

"I'll take a closer look as we march, extend it to your men as well," she said.

"Please do," I said, indolently toasting her. "And while we're on the subject, it's getting tiresome to call you Thief all the time. I assume you have a name?"

"Juliet," she replied without batting an eye.

I squinted at her.

"That was a lie," I said. "Your heartbeat quickened."

"Alas, you've seen through me," she drawled. "Samantha."

My squint deepened.

"Did you force your heartbeat to quicken just to sell this current lie?" I asked. "Because that's genuinely impressive."

"Did I? Vivienne," she said.

"Your heart went faster again," I sighed. "Now you're just screwing with me."

"I would never dare defy you, Your Grace," Thief said, sounding wounded.

"I'll call you Boris," I threatened. "Don't think I won't. Robber will have a song about it before the moon's turned and that's a promise."

She brushed back her bangs, seemingly amused.

"Vivienne Dartwick," she said.

Huh, that sounded highborn. Wouldn't have pegged her for one, though it wasn't impossible. There'd been a lot of former nobles who'd fallen on hard times after the Conquest.

"Had a feeling it was that one," I baldly lied.

My money had been on Juliet and I'd been coming pretty close to pretending I'd used a Name trick to know it was the truth. *And they said I'd never learn prudence.* I turned to offer an another refill but found only thin air. I waited for a long moment, but couldn't feel her eyes on me.

"I might have shot myself in the foot there," I admitted.

—

I ended up drifting from the path Masego had charted me. The fairy gate opened a few miles southwest of where I'd meant it to, though honesty compelled me to admit that might be on me more than Hierophant. Was I going to present it that way when we next spoke? No, absolutely not. Still, holding the destination in my mind when I opened the first gate was proving tricky when I'd never been there before. It was hardly a disaster, though. We'd have camp ready for sundown instead of Noon Bell, and a few hours of delay were hardly worth a second thought when I'd managed to lead fourteen thousand legionaries from Holden to central Callow in the span of a mere nine days. General Istrid was of the same opinion.

"That is a nasty trick you've got," the orc gravelled. "The Procerans are going to piss their pants the first time you appear in the middle of their fields without warning."

The two of us had gone with the vanguard, which for once was not made of my men. Istrid was riding a wolf the size of a pony, though noticeably broader. My own Zombie the Third had me standing taller than the orc, for once, since the great wolves stood closer to the ground. Mine also had wings, not that it was a competition. If it had been, though, hard to beat the flying undead horse. Her full contingent of wolf riders had preceded us, a horde of eight hundred that brought out old primal fears just to look upon. Beasts like those with riders just as green had been a plague on Callow for centuries, no match for the kingdom's knights on the field but able to ravage large swaths of territory and withdraw if they were not checked quickly enough. The reminder that they were on my side rang a little hollow when Istrid's own mount occasionally snapped at my own with fangs the size of daggers.

"Might not work out that cleanly," I said. "Black tells me they have a Named future-teller on their side. I figure there's decent odds there'll be an army waiting for me on the other side of the gate."

Neither of us bothered to pretend war with Procer wasn't around the corner.

"Then they have to pull off thousands from the border to wait for you," Istrid grinned savagely. "Their armies don't march so quick, Squire. You hop south, then you hop north and just like that their army's split in three – or the Fifteenth's torching their fields and poisoning their wells. Big place, Procer. Won't be easy to defend."

I hummed and did not disagree. I wasn't convinced, though. If Cordelia Hasenbach got her Crusade, that cause would attract more than armies. There'd be heroes too, and those had a knack for being in the right place at the right time to wreck the plans of people that worked on my side of the fence. The Fifteenth had been right behind the vanguard and I glimpsed Hune's tall silhouette, surrounded by a dozen smaller ones as she advanced. I must have let my gaze linger a little too long, because Istrid noticed.

"Thought you liked them smaller than that," the orc snorted.

"Wasn't that kind of look," I said.

The general wasn't exactly someone I wanted to discuss who I kept bed with, so I did not elaborate. Although, to be fair, the Istrid Knightsbane had been happily married for several decades so in that regard she was definitely doing better than me. The orc's very daughter had informed me that the word in Lower Miezani really was married and not 'mated', no matter what some Praesi books said. It wasn't an exact translation from the Kharsum term, which was closer to *bound-in-fortune*, but the meaning was the same even if the customs differed some.

"Oh, I see how it is," General Istrid grunted with amusement. "Got on your nerves, did she?"

I cast a steady look at the orc, who seemed rather unimpressed.

"We had something of a disagreement," I diplomatically said.

"She doesn't like you," the orc said, fairly bluntly.

I winced.

"That's a possible interpretation of it, yes," I said.

"You've been running with Named too long," the general said. "That sort of thing matters with a pack of villains, but she's an officer."

"I can work with people who don't like me," I said. "Hells, Juniper didn't when we started out."

"She's a sweet girl, my daughter," Istrid casually dismissed. "Ogres are harder to deal with."

I stared silently at the general. Juniper. Juniper, sweet? I'd seen her chew out a man so harshly over sloppy gear that he'd teared up. Even Robber tread lightly when she was in a bad mood, and the goblin regularly rode undead creatures I'd stuffed with explosives into active battlefields.

"The commander for my riders," the orc elaborated. "Finest one I ever got, leagues above the woman I had during the Conquest. I still want to break his teeth every time his smug lips open. Don't have to like him or trust him, though, because in the end we're both under the banner. Doesn't matter if you can't stand your legate, it's the Legions that come first – trust in that instead of the woman."

*Except my banner isn't exactly Malicia's, is it?* It stood on the same side, I'd made sure of that as much as I could. But our interests weren't all aligned. The ogre hadn't been wrong when she's said the Fifteenth was more likely to heed my orders than the Tower's, if it came down to it. That Hune probably wouldn't felt like a liability, but not one I could do much about. Setting aside the fact that the Hellhound would dig her heels in if tried to have the ogre transferred, I couldn't exactly use 'loyal to the Empire above me' as a reason to act. I wasn't sure I should, anyway. How likely was it that she was the only soldier in the Fifteenth who thought this way? We had a lot of Callowans these days but most my officers tribune rank and above were from the War College, and that meant greenskins and Praesi. I didn't like the thought of having a lightning rod for those who shared the belief, but there were risks to not giving those people voice at all. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. It would have to wait after the war, anyway. Changing the second in command of the Fifteenth right before the largest battle it'd ever been in would have been sheer stupidity.

"I got a lesson in ogre opinions," I sighed. "Not a pleasant conversation, though it was worth having."

"Nim's never been accused of being too much of a laugh," Istrid contributed. "There's a reason she was assigned in the Wasteland. Mok's better."

Marshal Nim, that was who she referred to. The ogre that led the Seventh Legion and held overall command of every legion in Praes. The other was General Mok, commander of the Third and currently at the Proceran border under Grem One-Eye. The two most powerful ogres in the Empire, not that you'd know to hear Istrid speak of them.



"Surprised one made Marshal," I finally said. "I didn't get the feeling from Hune they particularly wanted to get involved with the rest of Praes."

"Oh, they talk a good talk," the general conceded. "But they like a good scrap as much as anyone. They can't farm for shit in their hills, anyway, so they have to bring in the food with coin."

"Thalassina's pretty close," I noted.

As the main trading port in the Wasteland, it was from there the grain imported from abroad poured through. There would be advantages to that, if trade was what kept the Hall of Skulls fed.

"Though that can't be pleasant all the time," I added after a moment.

The disadvantages of having a Praesi High Lord this close to your backyard rather spoke for themselves. Istrid snorted.

"They can talk when they share a border with Wolof," she said. "Or the fucking Wallerspawn."

A moment later she remembered my tan wasn't all from the sun, and cleared her throat.

"No offence meant," Istrid said.

I wasn't eager to get into an argument with an orc about who exactly was in the wrong when it came to centuries-old border wars that had occurred often enough Daoine had seen fit to build a giant wall, so I let that one go. Probably for the best, since we were interrupted not long after. One of my mages hurried at our side, bringing word from the latest scrying. Diabolist was on the move, undead had poured out of Liesse. They were going, I was told, south. Towards the eight thousand men Ankou had sent out at my order.

It looked like the Second Battle of Liesse was going to have an opening act.

## **Chapter 53: Manoeuvring**

*"War is a breed of conflict decided by the allocation of resources. Through better apportionment a lesser nation can defeat a greater, but never if decision-making is of equal standing on both sides."*

– Extract from "The Modern Legion", a treatise by Marshal Ranker

Come nightfall I held council. We'd ended the march two hours before sunset when the scouts found grounds suitable for a camp, and the legionaries had taken to building it with veteran

expertise. The Fifteenth's two thousand under Hune had raised palisades in the centre, with the camps of the other three legions forming a triad of spokes coming from it. Wide avenues were made for swift troop deployment, watches set before the wooden walls were even finished and scouting lines scattered around in case the enemy attempted to steal a march in the dark. I'd hesitated about the camp, but decided not to gainsay General Istrid when she suggested we should stop. Another two hours of marching wouldn't gain us much ground, but proper fortifications would make a real difference if the Diabolist's host tried a surprise offensive. That I'd call a war council was to be expected, given that the decision to march had been made that very morning and was a major departure from our previous operational plan. I'd spent the daylight in conference with mages and Thief, trying to get a better picture of the opposition, and I was glad I had. I would not have enjoyed looking like a reckless fool in front of these particular commanders, though there might be some grain of truth to that.

More reckless than fool, I liked to think, but that was the kind of judgement best passed on the dead.

I had three of the foremost Imperial officers in Callow facing me. General Istrid Knightsbane, commander of the Sixth Legion. *Ironsides*, their cognomen was. To orcs, perhaps the only one of their own that could top the reputation of Istrid's legion was Grem One-Eye's, for they'd earned that title breaking a charge of Callowan knights. General Orim – the Grim, his men fondly called him – led the Fifth Legion, cognomen *Exterminatus*. They'd earned that name during the Praesi civil war, executing near five thousand Praesi prisoners to ensure they wouldn't be slowed on the march. The third and last was General Sacker, commander of the Ninth Legion. Cognomen *Regicides*. Her goblins had been the ones to kill the Shining Prince when he'd ascended to the throne of Callow halfway through the Fields of Streges. The red paint on her throat was kept by all her men as well, a reminder they'd slit open the throat of royalty without flinching. Hune and myself were green, compared to that assembly. The Fifteenth had been founded only two years ago, and though it had a score of victories under its belt most of my men were still just a few months out of the training camps. The fights I'd put them through so far had hardened them, but it would be years before they had the wealth of experience of the three legions now with me.

I cleared my throat when all were seated, and one of Hune's aides provided scrolls to the three generals. Sacker seemed amused at the formality, Orim indifferent and I bit back a sigh when I saw Istrid was reading through hers too quickly for it to be anything but a glance.

"We've confirmed two things about the enemy," I said. "The first is that they number between twenty and twenty-five thousand, with two thousand at most being living."

"Always the way, with undead armies," Istrid grunted. "They keep enough necromancers to have a leash and a few elite troops but nothing more. If they mix the forces too much they'll start needing a supply train, and dispensing with those is one of the major advantages of raising the dead."

"I've had intelligence that Diabolist had no more than six thousand living in her entire forces as of five months ago," I said. "If we manage to wipe that two thousand, it'll cripple her army before we move on Liesse."

"I don't like the numbers," General Orim bluntly said. "If we were dealing with bones or shamblers we could handle two to one, but these 'wights' are supposed to be upper grade."

"We let this go unchallenged and they'll wipe the Ankou levies, Orim," General Sacker spoke, her voice a dry whisper. "Then raise them still fresh. No coincidence, that number of mages. If we do nothing they gain another eight thousand foot, already armed and armoured."

"Setting that aside, allowing a third of our Callowan reinforcements to be killed before the battle even begins will have stark effect on morale," I flatly reminded them.

Considering I'd ordered those city guards to march in the first place I balked at the idea of letting them get attacked without reinforcing for personal reasons as well, but there was no point in speaking of that to these three. All of them had been part of the Conquest, I doubted they had many qualms about spending Callowan lives.

"It was foolish of their commander to circle by the south," Hune said, the stone we'd dragged inside for her to sit on pushing into the ground. "They should have gone north and joined with the Southpool levies."

Even half-crouched, her head touched the ceiling of the tent.

"That one rests on my shoulders," I said. "I ordered them to muster as swiftly as possible, which is why the Southpool men were already on the move. Their commander took what she saw as the least risk-prone route, however incorrect her judgement."

"Can't expect too much of civilians in armour," Istrid said, which was not excuse but perhaps lessening of blame.

Disinclined to let the conversation linger here, I moved it along with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

"Second thing we've confirmed: the enemy commander is Lord Fasili Miremebe," I told them. "Formerly heir to Aksum. If someone can be considered the Diabolist's right hand, it's him."

"That crazy old witch Abreha disinherited him?" General Sacker croaked. "Breaking with the Truebloods in full then. Bold, for her. She usually hedges her bets."

"Don't you spoil this campaign with talk about bloody politics," General Istrid grunted. "I take it gating to their back isn't an option? I doubt we'd be treading the plains if it was."

It was my first instinct to keep them in the dark about my exact capacities, but I forced myself to ignore it. Paranoia had a place, but war councils wasn't it.

"I've never been in the region before," I said. "In those cases I need Hierophant at my side to chart a path through Arcadia. In theory I could try, but there's no telling how long we'd be in there or exactly where we'd come out."

"I can still be used to retreat, at least," General Orim growled. "Being able to leave beyond pursuit is already major advantage."

My brows rose. I'd never actually considered that. In part because I'd never lost a pitched battle, but also because I did tend to think on the offensive. General Sacker had been reading through the scroll carefully while we talked, and only spoke again when she'd finished.

"The Miremebe boy has only middling military record," she said. "One internal purge at his great-aunt's behest, held the left wing when Sahelian was manhandled during the Liesse Rebellion. Are we sure the information is correct?"

"It was supplied by Her Dread Majesty," I said. "I can't guarantee it, but I am disinclined to doubt."

I'd had my own people dig into Lord Fasili as well, of course. Aisha had connections in Praes and had called on them, but they'd not unearthed anything the Empress' spies had not and not everything they did. I had been worth the effort anyway, if only to confirm part of what I'd been given by the Tower. Blind trust had never been a virtue in my eyes, and was much worse than that if offered to a villain.

"Tutored by Asmund of the Dark Teeth Clan and Lady Taslima Ubid," General Orim said, frowning at his scroll. "I know one of these names."

General Istrid let out a noise of surprise.

"Asmund, the senior tribune from the Third?" she said. "Thought he was dead."

"Lost a hand and resigned his commission after they put him under the Quartermaster," the other orc told her.

"Taslima was on the general staff of the Eleventh," Sacker croaked. "Senior Mage."

"There's a reason I had that on the final report," I said. "Legate Hune?"

"Fasili Mirembe has studied the Legions," the ogre stated bluntly. "In depth, from officers that fought during the Conquest. He will be prepared for our tactics."

I inclined my head at the legate.

"I very much want him dead," I said, not bothering to phrase it delicately. "If we manage to off Diabolist's best general before the battle proper, her forces will be shaken when we assault. She's only got so much talent left to call on."

"It'll be tricky catching up to them in time," General Istrid said. "Their men don't get tired on the move, and it's not impossible for them to march through the night."

"Not often," General Orim said. "They can't let their necromancers get too tired or they'll lose hold of the undead."

I cleared my throat.

"We don't have the sorcery to scry through their wards on hand," I said. "But I *can* scry Hierophant, who most definitely can. From our current positions, if the pace remains the same, we should meet with the Ankou troops two days before they do. Our current guess at when battle would take place is nine days, barring the unexpected."

I watched rueful smiles bloom across the faces of the three greenskins facing me.

"Unexpected. Heh," General Sacker whispered.

"Ah, to be young again," Istrid mused.

—

I'd told Thief, not too long ago, that Akua had been too straightforward of late.

I learned how correct I'd been exactly one day too late, when I was scried in panic by the Fifteenth's mage lines in the south. Liesse had spewed out a second army in the middle of the night,

while we were encamped. After the ritual ended I remained alone for a long moment, and considered how badly I might have just fucked up. When I'd gone to collect the three legions before taking a fairy gate north I had tipped my hand. Diabolist now had an estimate of how long it would take me to ferry troops and she'd planned accordingly. As of now, the host under Fasili had kept the same pace and my own was only two days away from linking up with the Ankou troops. I closed my eyes and considered the parts in movement. If we kept marching west, we lost two days. Keeping in mind how long it would take me to pass through Arcadia if things went well, if we did this then Akua's second host of twenty thousand would very likely have time to attack the men coming down from Southpool. Four to one against mages and undead? They'd be shattered within an hour of the first sword being drawn. The rest of my forces were in southern Callow, and if I left now to try to get them on the field up here would be pointless. Both the Ankou troops and the Southpool ones would be wiped by Akua's armies before I even finished gating back to the rest of the Fifteenth.

I should have seen it coming, when I ordered the muster. Diabolist wasn't an attacker by nature, not exactly. She was an opportunist. She'd waited until she could get a read on how quickly I could move, then gone to pluck the low-hanging fruits. The worst of it was that there was no real way to warn either of the Callowan forces. They weren't Legions, they didn't have mage lines for me to contact. The colder part of me considered the decision to make even as the rest remained in shick. If this was to be purely about numbers, I knew what call I had to make. Southpool was sending five thousand men, Ankou eight thousand better trained and better equipped. *She didn't even need to do anything. She just waited for me to blunder, and I did.* There were advantages to being the swiftest player on the field, but costs as well. If you were the first to move then your actions were out in the open. But I hadn't thought it would matter. I'd believed, deep down, that Akua would remain holed up in her lair and let me come to her. Because that was what villains did, wasn't it? They raised the flying fortress and let the heroes knock at the gate. And now people were going to die because I hadn't been careful enough. I only realized I was crushing the goblet in my hand when the wine wet my fingers. I called for my commanders as soon as I was no longer frosting every surface in sight.

"We're losing one of those armies," General Istrid bluntly said.

There wasn't any hemming and hawing from the others. I could see in their eyes that the five thousand from Southpool had been written off before I was done speaking the sentence.

"Though her stratagem was a surprise, the deployments remain real," Hune noted.

I invited her to elaborate with a look.

"Fasili Mirembe is within reach," she said. "So are his necromancers. Their loss would still be a blow to her defences."

"Five thousand levies for a third of her mages or more," General Sacker croaked. "It is an acceptable trade."

"That's if we can decisively beat the boy," General Orim grunted. "If he retreats in good order after a cursory skirmish, we will have been fully duped."

"So we strike hard," General Istrid growled.

*Or is that what Diabolist wants? I thought. For us to commit here, where she knows we're coming and has time to deploy every manner of nasty trick?* The first time I'd ever seen Akua, when he'd spied on her conversation with Black, she'd called herself a skilled commander. I'd chalked that up to arrogance since, since she had no real victories to her name, but the arrogance might just have been mine. I'd never seen Akua Sahelian fighting an actual war before, had I? Before the battles had always been just a tool for positioning, a way for her to implement her plots. Now she'd bared her knife, and on our very first round she'd been the one to draw blood. As ever when dealing with Diabolist, the spiral of second-guessing and doubt was as dangerous as her actual actions. Whether Fasili and the mages were bait or not did not matter, in the end. Fighting him with the Ankou troops was still the best decision I could make. It niggled at the back of my mind that thinking about the best decision Juniper could make was exactly how I'd predicted her actions, during our war games, but was that alone enough to have me gate for the Southpool men instead? *No*, I admitted. It was almost presumptuous, to call joining up with Ankou reinforcements the best move. *All it is is the lesser mistake of the tow before me.*

"We keep going," I said, and the words felt like ashes in my mouth.

I did not ask any gods for forgiveness. The ones that would grant it were my foes, and the ones I worked for knew nothing of the word.

—

It was a close thing, and I only avoided disaster by leaning into my instincts. Two hours before sunset, on the day before we joined the Ankou troops, I passed down instructions not to make camp and to continue marching after dark. Guided by magelights and goblins, our host of fourteen thousand pressed on until midnight. The pace slowed in the dark, but I was feeling an itch on the back of my neck. A sense of danger not yet revealed. Three hours of rest were granted before we resumed the march, and so

narrowly avoided disaster. We found the Ankou city guard out in the field shortly before Morning Bell. We found the host of the dead as well, lines tirelessly advancing under the light of the rising sun.

"And that's why when a Named tells you to keep marching, you fucking do it," General Istrid said, and spat to the side. "This would have been a bad one, mark my words."

We were both mounted again, the orc remaining at my side as our legions spread out. My helmet kept under my arm, I gazed at the enemy host.

"They marched through the entire night," I said. "Gods, if you hadn't warned me they could..."

"Their necromancers will be tired," the Knightsbane said. "But our legionaries are as well. We'll have to be real careful with that shield wall, Squire. Formations are what lets us win this. If they break them we'll be in deep shit. Your countrymen can't be relied on, not with dead on the other side and numbers that high."

"You underestimate them," I replied. "This is Callow, general. We've seen the dead walk before. We've turned them back, again and again."

"From walls," the orc grunted. "This is open field, and I don't see no fucking knights. Just scared guards in cheap mail with spears they've only ever drilled with."

"That's why we spread Hune's men through them, to serve as a spine," I said.

I'd put the legate in charge of that entire division of the host, replacing the commander from Ankou. That ten thousand combined would serve as our centre, with the Fifth serving as the right wing and the Ninth as the left. Both legions had left a gap between themselves and the Callowans, bait for Fasili to send his wights through in an attempt to isolate our forces. Istrid's own Fourth we were keeping in reserve behind the rest, with her wolf riders as an independent command.

"Twenty-three thousand on their side, twenty-two thousand on ours," the Knightsbane growled. "We're in for a bloody day."

"If we can wipe their casters they fall apart," I said.

Without the necromancers controlling them the wights would lack organization. They'd still fight with the intelligence of living soldiers, more or less, but without officers or orders. Numbers mattered less when they belonged to a mob.



"They won't leave their mages unprotected," General Istrid said. "I'm guessing they'll go back to old Legions tactics from before the Reforms. They'll keep five thousand back in a square around the casters and come in a wave, then rely on sorcery to punch a hole and try to flip our lines."

"We don't have enough mages and sappers with the Fifteenth to break a wave," I murmured. "Hune'll keep the fireballs back until she has to plug a gap to avoid exhausting her mage lines."

"They'll have a ritual prepared," the orc laughed. "Those wily old Wasteland foxes always do. But I ain't worried, to tell you the truth."

I glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. General Istrid's lips split into a vicious grin, ivory fangs glinting in the morning sun.

"Whatever sorcery they're going to pull out, Squire, I doubt it's going to be worse than *you*."

## **Interlude: Skirmish I**

*"If I had an aurelius for every assassination attempt, I wouldn't have to keep raising taxes."*

– Dread Emperor Pernicious, the Imperiled

Commander Joan Ansel had feigned anger when the ogre took command, for that was what her men wanted from her, but deep down all she felt was pathetic relief. This was all far beyond her ability to deal with. She'd been Royal Guard, once upon a time, and fought in the Siege of Laure until one of the gates gave and the Praesi ran loose in the capital. That record had seen her appointed to lead the city guard of Ankou a decade down the line, but her men forgot she'd been a *captain* back then. What did she know of leading armies, of field tactics and the like? Her job had been to hold the fucking wall with the company of soldiers that answered to her, and that duty she'd discharged and well. It hadn't been her men that gave, when the Empire came knocking. This, though, this was all more than she could handle. The truth of how close they'd come to being wiped out by the enemy before the Legions ever caught sight of them still had fear running down her spine. Weeping Heavens, she'd still run if she could. Not that it was an option.

The fair-haired woman glanced back over the ranks and caught sight of that lone silhouette on horseback, a colourful cloak stirring in the wind behind it. The Black Queen herself had come to take charge, and she was said to have strong opinions on desertion. Joan hid a flinch under her helmet. They'd all heard how the Gallowborne had been snatched straight from the gallows and used 'til they were spent on foreign fields. The woman knew Her Grace had been named Vicequeen of Callow by the Tower, that

she did not hold the throne in her own right as the Fairfaxes had, but balls to that. It was open secret the Black Queen had slugged the Wasteland in the stomach until it spat out a crown for her to wear. *She's never lost a battle*, Joan told herself. *We won't die today*. She clutched that belief tight, watching the ranks of the dead advance. Thousands upon thousands, pale as the grave even in the morning sun. Their armaments weren't pretty like those of the Legions, no matching colours and smooth lines. Just pieces of armour slapped together over a marching corpse, blades and spears and every weapon that could be gotten cheaply in hand. They did not look fearsome, until you saw there was only death in those empty eyes.

Her men, at least, had decent mail and good spears. The city guard used clubs and knives within Ankou to keep the peace, but it was tradition old as the kingdom that all of them drill with the spear every month. The city was the last holdfast between Callow and the fucking Procerans, if the Vales fell. It was expected to be able to hold until the kingdom's armies arrived. *Ankou has walls*, she thought. *Here there is only barley and black earth*. Both would be stained red before long. Joan felt her hands shake with tremors they'd disdained when she was still young, but she'd been a dumb twat at twenty hadn't she? Thinking Laure could hold against the godsdamned Carrion Lord and his pack of monsters. Now she neared fifty and knew better. There was no winning against the Wasteland. *And the harder we fight, the harder we die*. The thought was dark, but Joan had not felt this powerless in decades. The Imperial Governor in Ankou had been content to wring taxes out of the people and ignore them otherwise, until his term ended last year. They'd all gone on with their lives with no one bothering with them.

Now Joan was back in the Tower's eye, sworn to die in its name.

"Commander Ansel," the mountain said. "Your men seem dispirited."

Joan swallowed and looked up at the ogre. Legate Hune, she'd said her name was. One of the Fifteenth's top officers though not one she'd ever heard of, like the Hellhound or Hakram Deadhand. The creature was large as a dozen men, and those eyes were studying her like she was some sort of insect one misstep away from being squashed. *Gods*, she thought, *why did I not retire?* Coin would have been tight, but better poor than dead.

"They'll hold, ma'am," she stiffly told the monster. "They know the stakes."

You didn't need to be some great general to see the Black Queen had put Joan's men in the centre because all she wanted from them was to hold. The wings on both sides were Legions, and it'd be them who decided the battle while Callowans died like dogs. *But if the centre collapses, this turns into slaughter*. The dead would split the Black Queen's army in two and overwhelm it in

small bits. The fair-haired woman knew this, but she wasn't sure her soldiers did. *And even if they do, are they going to give a shit when their faces are getting chewed off?* Joan shivered. It was easy to see the disaster this could turn into.

"They will," Legate Hune agreed calmly. "Pass this down to your officers: the legionaries of the Fifteenth are under instruction to kill any men fleeing the battlefield. Cowardice will not be tolerated."

Joan's eyes flicked to the Black Queen, still unmoving in the distance. Gods it was eerie how still she was.

"The Vicequeen will not gainsay that order, commander," the monster said coldly. "You will find no saving grace there. She has no patience for the yellow-bellied."

*Easy for you to call people that,* she thought. *You're a fucking battering ram unto yourself.*

"We'll hold," Joan said, and hated how weak it sounded.

She breathed in and out, kept her hands against her side to end the shaking.

"Down here in the mud, it's us who holds the line," she whispered, and that one had some iron to it.

The old song spoke about dying free, though, didn't it? She smiled bitterly. Well, songs were songs. Creation was never as pretty as they said.

—

Orim of the Tarred Dogs breathed in deeply. The air was crisp and clean out here, nothing like the squalid reek of Laure. He felt the part of him that was the general melt away, the chief he'd once been baring his fangs anew. Gods, it was good to be at war again. To have an enemy to chew up, an army to break and scatter and *crush underfoot*. It was the way orcs were meant to live, not playing fucking wet nurse to a mob of bleating Callowan cattle. Oh, he knew why Lord Black had garrisoned him in Laure. The day he'd spilled the lifeblood of five thousand Praesi on Wasteland grounds still rang in people's ear, a whisper of fear and death if he was crossed. It had kept the likes of Mazus in line and the local waste as well. But having to be patient and kind and all those hundred tedious little duties had worn away at him. Orim was fifty-three, now, but today he felt young again. It was going to be a good day, and all he regretted was that he had to fight under a green girl instead of Grem or the Carrion Lord. What Lord Black saw in the Wallerspaw was beyond him. She had a way with killing, but the Empire had no shortage of killers. Few of them were so irritatingly high-minded about getting the job done.

His general staff arrayed around him, Orim studied the rebel army. The wights would not be easy meat, but this was a battle that could be won. The Wastelander boy leading the other side had thickened his ranks before approaching, massing the dead to match the line of Callowan levies. Deeper lines, though. The mixed Fifteenth and levies numbered ten thousand in total, but the rebels must have closer to fourteen or fifteen thousand facing them. It was like Istrid had thought, Mirembe was aiming to break the centre and split them. There was more to enemy tactics than a single wave though. A chunk of three thousand wights had been split from the rest of the host and was heading towards Orim's own Fifth Legion. Behind the centre of the rebel army the living could be glimpsed, Praesi household troops and mages that couldn't be more than two thousand. There were another three thousand wights in a ring around them, which was a damned shame. Istrid's riders could have looped around to hit the Praesi if they hadn't kept those.

"General Sacker seems to have the lucky draw of the day," his Staff Tribune said.

Orim grunted in assent, though he didn't look at the Taghreb. Sacker's Ninth made up the left wing, and unlike his own legion there was no detached division heading for her. The orc licked his chops, the atrophied muscles of his face keeping his lips near-unmoving. A weakness he'd been born with, one that had seen him called Grim for how hard it was to smile. He'd been lucky it hadn't been obvious when he'd been a babe. Orcs born flawed didn't make it through long winters.

"Prepare to receive them," he ordered. "Staggered welcome."

His Senior Sapper snorted, then spoke to the flag-bearers. Twice red cloth rose, and it was fewer than thirty heartbeats before the scorpions began firing. Steel-tipped javelins tore through the first rank of the three thousand wights moving towards the Fifth like wet parchment. The undead were within three hundred feet, good killing range. The second volley flew twenty heartbeats later, this one angled to punch through more than one wight per projectile. The rebels had put cheap armour on their dead, but going through flesh and bone still took strength: it was a rare javelin that took more than two. The wights began to quicken their steps before the third volley launched, much as Orim had expected. If he'd had longer to prepare the chief would have made his sappers trap the advance, but the rebels had been too swift for that. No matter. Undead hordes had no skill to them, even the clever ones, and this one seemed to have no skirmishers to field. They'd bleed for that. The flags rose again and the Fifth's sapper lines shot forward across the field. They slowed right before the enemy entered range, the sharpeners thrown carving holes into the enemy ranks with loud cracks. The goblins

immediately began to withdraw at a measured pace, munitions detonating every ten heartbeats with disciplined precision.

"We'll have a more than a tenth of them gone before they reach our shield wall, at this rate," his Staff Tribune observed.

"Close up is where undead shine," Orim reminded her. "This won't last."

He'd learned that the hard way, when they'd marched on Okoro during the civil war. Skirmishers scythed through the first few ranks of enemy undead and he'd thought it was going to be a slaughter, but it had ended up so close a victory it might as well have been a draw. Undead did not tire, or break when they lost too many. You couldn't flip their line the way you did the living because they didn't panic and flee. They didn't stop unless you broke them all, or the necromancers holding their leash. Three thousand wights against the four thousand men of his Fifth seemed like throwing away bodies but it wasn't that. The boy on the other side knew whatever dead managed to reach their lines would keep Orim's legion too busy to redeploy for at least an hour. *He'd going to be hitting the centre's right side*, the orc thought. The wights sent against the Fifth had been meant to prevent it from reinforcing there: Mirembe was trying to create weakness for him to tear through. But that wouldn't be enough, not with Istrid's legion kept back to plug exactly that sort of gap. *So what are you truly up to, Wastelander?*

One hundred feet until the wights hit the shield wall. No crossbow fire had greeted them when they entered range, for that would have been a pointless waste of bolts. Nothing that light would put down the likes of them. Orim spat to the side and made his decision.

"Heavies to the front," he said. "Senior Mage Dolene."

"Sir?" the Soninke replied.

"No volleys," he ordered. "A Hook, then Lob until told otherwise."

Whatever the rebels were up to, it depended on him being pinned down. To unmake their design he must tear through the opposition as quickly as possible. The orc watched as the ranks of the Fifth smoothly redeployed, the sappers taking refuge as his men and orc in heavy plate came to the fore. They would tire swiftly, he knew, but regulars would not make as much of an impact. He would take the gamble. Mere moments before the wights smashed into his frontline fireballs bloomed, rising up at a sharp angle before being pulled down backwards into the first rank of the wights. *Hook*. Flame consumed the undead, intensely concentrated so it would bite hungrily into dead flesh. The horns sounded and his heavies let out a loud cry, shields raised as they charged into

the enemy. There was a thundering crash of steel on steel and the mage lines crafted flame again, tossing them into the roiling mass of wights far from the frontline. *Lob*, the doctrine called it. Meant to weaken the pressure of the enemy so it could be devoured in waves.

The glare of the sun glinting on his helm, Orim the Grim watched the struggle of steel against dead flesh and his lips half-twitched into a grotesque smile.

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General Sacker watched from her raised platform as the line of Ankou men bent under the weight of the undead and frowned. Her missing eye itched, the urge of scratching the scarred tissue ever an effort to master. Either the enemy was blundering, or they had. The Callowans had thin blood and there could be no turnaround expected from them, but the centre was holding in the face of the wights. Legate Hune's legionaries steadied the parts of it that wavered, filling the gaps with red-painted steel and unflinching discipline. The Matron was almost impressed. Most of the Fifteenth was fresh out of the camps and of conquered stock to boot, which had seen her lower her expectations, but the men she saw fighting did so as proper legionaries. *It is not merely Names that won them the victories, then.* Something to consider. Any pack of goatherds could win a battle against an army if a demigod stood at their head, but the Squire had yet to act. This was the men of the Fifteenth alone and they were acquitting themselves more than passably. Had Sahelian's dogs made the same erroneous assumption she had, perhaps?

It seemed unlikely. The Diabolist had fought Lord Black's apprentice many a time, and seen the Fifteenth in action twice. Yet Fasili Mirembe's army was headed towards defeat, should matters continue to unfold as they now did. Sacker's men were cutting through the wights in front of them at a steady rate, sharpers and demolition charges opening holes she saw broadened with mage fire. Her regulars were pushing back the enemy, slowly but surely. And when they found nothing but field in front of them, they would turn to flank the wights facing the Callowans. Sacker's remaining eye was not as sharp as it used to be when she'd been a young and red-handed Matron — alchemical concoctions could lengthen her lifespan, but not reverse the ravages of time — but she saw clearly enough. And what she saw was this: there were too few wights facing her Ninth. There'd been no need for Lord Mirembe to have fifteen thousand undead facing the ten thousand at the centre. Some of these now stood before her legionaries, but not enough to account for the numbers. Where had the rest gone?

When the battle had begun, there'd been a gap between Orim's Fifth and the centre. When the Fifth became tied down Legate Hune

had lengthened her line to avoid getting flanked through it. Studying the mass of silent yet writhing undead, Sacker found a current. *The ranks are thinner where the gap was*, the goblin thought. *They're massing wights in front of it to prepare for a push.* Mireembe on the other side had to know it would not win him the battle even if he broke through there. Istrid would charge into there fangs bared and stabilize the centre. *And after that?* Sacker pondered. The Praesi still had a ritual up their sleeve, this was a given. Superior sorcery was their greatest advantage. *They wait until Istrid is committed there. Orim won't be able to disengage from the wights after him, even if they're not a real threat to him.* The orc had engaged the three thousand sent towards him aggressively, she'd noted, using tactics that Legion doctrine usually preached should be used against levies. The picture, slowly, began to paint itself. With the Fourth filling the gap, the only uncommitted force on the field would be Istrid's riders. *And if the rebels hit the Fourth with their ritual, not only do they reopen the gap but they're costing us legionaries instead of Callowans.*

Wolf riders alone would not be able to turn back the wights pouring through. They were not meant for hard fights like those. What, then, would be sent to prevent Sacker's own legion from intervening? The old goblin's eyes turned to the Praesi holed up behind the battlefield. Household troops, around a thousand. Half that number of mages and officers. And four hundred men in Helikean scale armour, most likely mercenaries. By themselves, not a threat. But able to withstand eight hundred wolf riders if those attempted a charge on the mages. Which left the three thousand wights currently deployed in a ring around the Praesi free to tie down the Ninth Legion while the left flank collapsed. It was a pretty little strategy, she would admit. Neatly designed to exploit the weaknesses of their host. It did not, however, account for the Squire. *They cannot be so blind as to discount her*, she thought. *There is still an element missing.* Whether it could be found would decide the victor of the day.

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Abigail screamed herself hoarse, smashing her shield in a dead man's face. The nose broke with a crack but the shit didn't care in the slightest, hacking at her from the side. Good legionary mail had the blade bouncing off but it would leave a bruise. Sweat pouring down her face, she rammed her sword in the wight's throat and felt the spine give to goblin steel. She hacked the head off while it continued wailing at her, her shield denting under the force of the blows. Even headless the wight kept on attacking, and something smashed into her helmet that had her vision swimming. She felt someone pull her back and a tall orc filled the empty space, forcing down the wight and letting the legionaries behind him hack it to pieces.

"Captain, you still with us?" a man's voice asked.

Abigail wiped the spittle and sweat off her lips, focusing on the person it belonged to. Sergeant Tadaaki, whose dark face was creased with worry. She clapped the Soninke's shoulder, feeling a wave of nausea coming over her.

"I'm f--"

She bent to the side to empty her stomach on the ground.

"Fine, sergeant," she moaned after. "I am fine."

No bleeding parts, so there was nothing to bother what few healers they had with. The disgusting taste lingering in her mouth, Abigail wiped her face and deeply regretted having tried her lieutenant's 'mystery stew'. Secret Taghreb recipe her fucking ass. Didn't look any better coming out than it had going in. *Never falling for that one again. That wasn't godsdamned rabbit floating in the stuff, no matter what he said.*

"Take a breather, ma'am," the sergeant said. "I'll handle the frontline."

"Don't get aggressive, Tadaaki," she said. "We can't afford the losses. Bloody militia's shaky enough as is."

"They're *your* people," the Soninke replied, flashing a grin.

Abigail spat the scum out of her mouth, hoping the man whose boot she'd dirtied hadn't noticed.

"They're Ankouans," Abigail argued. "They've got more in common with goats than a good Summerholm girl like me."

Everybody knew the people in Ankou were barely Callowan at all, what with all that breeding with Procerans. Sergeant Tadaaki left her to the sound of laughter. Good sort, that one, for a Wastelander anyway. Captain Abigail made her way to the back of the line and undid the straps of her helmet, taking it off long enough to let her sweat-soaked curls cool a little. *Gods Above*, she thought as she watched the melee ahead, *what a mess*. She could not believe she'd ever been drunk enough to think enrolling in the Legions was a good idea. Abigail had come within an inch of dying twice in the last year, and now held the dubious distinction of knowing what fae blood tasted like. Screaming while hacking at Summer warriors came with drawbacks when red flew. Well, it beat being a tanner at least. Her family home had gone up in green flames when the Black Queen tangled with the Lone Swordsman a while back and her uncle had made it clear that being allowed to live under his roof came at the price of going into his trade. Her two brothers had folded, but she'd decided



she wasn't going to smell like rotting corpse garbage for the rest of her life.

She was coming to reconsider that decision, but with three years left to her service that meant less than nothing. There wasn't anyone in the Fifteenth that was idiotic enough to think that *desertion* was an option. The captain rolled her shoulders, wishing she could take off her mail for even ten heartbeats. Her aketon was drenched, and now that she wasn't busy trying not to get killed she realized that her nipples itched something fierce. Ugh. She took a look at the melee to distract herself, knowing she'd have to go back before long. Tribune Ashan would report her otherwise, and Legate Hune was strict with disciplinary actions. The wights were chewing into the lines, but not as bad as she'd thought they would. The Ankouans were holding up pretty well, for a pack of hacks with spears. Probably helped they didn't let the dead get too close. Her own company rotated the lines often enough no one was dropping from exhaustion, though the enemy was hard on regulars like her. They swung harder than living men did, and if their armour had been any better they'd have been a hundred Hells to put down. Still, overall she called this better than Dormer – though 'less dangerous than fire-spitting immortals from a legend world' was a fairly low bar to set, now that she thought about it. At least she hadn't pissed herself this time, so there was that, though if the battle continued for another few hours there was no guarantee that would last.

It was because she was at the back of the line that she noticed it. She could see the rest of the army, compare where it stood to where her men did. Realize that her part of it was being pushed back, step by step. It wasn't some great turning of the tide or anything like that. Just... pressure. Slowly increasing. *And we're bending in front of it.*

"Shit," she said feelingly, and fumbled the clasp of her helmet after forcing it on. "Shitshitshit."

Tribune Ashan's cohort, of which her company made up half, was the anchor for right side of the centre. If they broke, then the wights had nothing to stop them and the swarm was going to be coming from all sides. Unsheathing her sword, Abigail went back cursing into the fray and really hoped that someone, anyone, was noticing how close to disaster they were edging.

## **Interlude: Skirmish II**

*"Mark my words, the Imperial banner will be flying above Summerholm by midsummer."*

– Dread Empress Regalia II, shortly before initiating the Sixty Years War

"Sound the horns," General Istrid said.

The Red Rage pulsed in the back of her head, the song of slaughter sweetly beckoning. She'd learned to ignore it, since she'd taken her oaths to the Legion all these years ago. Still the urge was always there, to let the howl loose and sink her fangs into one quarry after another until all was left of her was the joy and the blood. Orcs never really went tame, even when you drilled them and clad them in man's armour. Her warlord understood that, had never tried to make them anything but what they were. Instead he gave them enemies and taught them to be better killers, to wed savagery to discipline and something *greater* than themselves. Some of the younger greenskins nowadays thought that great thing was the Empire, but they'd been born in different times. Istrid of the Red Shields worshipped only at the altar of the Legions of Terror, the greatest killing machine Calernia had ever seen. What was Praes, to her? A pack of squabbling humans decked in silks and too much gold. Should she ever get the order, she would burn everything they had raised to ashes and salt the grounds of their ancestral homes.

It might just come to that. The Rage pounded her temples like a drum at the thought. Black's scrappy little apprentice had men singing of revolution these days, and even Her Dread Majesty was getting her hands dirty in the Wasteland. After they dealt with this Sahelian girl, the old order was going to see *revisiting*. She savoured the killing yet to come, for many reasons. The Red Shields Clan was not unbroken lineage like the Howling Wolves or the Ivory Fangs, but the shamans still spoke histories from the dead clan that had birthed her own. Of the days when greenskin hordes sacked Wolof and Okoro as they wished, took tribute from the kneeling kings of Aksum and fought great battles against Deoraithe in the Golden Bloom. Even before the Miezans the strength of her people had been waning in the face of high walls and cunning sorceries, but Creation was a wheel ever spinning. Every dog had their day, if they were patient enough. Her people's felt like it was coming.

The Fourth did not use Praesi-made horns for their signalling. Istrid had her own crafted from the bones of the great drakes whose remains still littered the Steppes, great carved things that took an ogre to blow them. Their call was deep and shivering, the hollow cry of creatures long dead to this land. It was the promise of death, and Istrid's legionaries marched to it against the last gasps of the old order.

Squire's legate had done what she could but these Callowans were watchmen, not Royal Guard. When the wights pressed where the line was thinnest and the men of the Fifteenth started dying, the left side of the centre wavered. Istrid had ordered the horns sounded before it could collapse entirely, and watched as her legionaries steadied the front before edging the Callowans aside. Her Fourth had earned their cognomen at Black's own word, after the Fields, for turning back the mounted killers of the kingdom. *Ironsides*.

It had a lot of people thinking she'd raised her legion for defence, for taking a hit and swinging back. Ignorance, that. Istrid Knightsbane had climbed her way to the heights where she now stood by massacring everything in her way, be it rivals chiefs or Wasteland lords or the chivalry of Callow. She'd raised her army in her image: brute force made host. She had fewer sappers than any other legion in service, only the requisite number of mages and the Fourth was the only Praesi host with more heavies than regulars on the rolls. There was a reason they paired her with Sacker, she knew. Her old friend would use finesse where she did not, temper her more belligerent instincts. But there would be no need for deep thinking, today.

In front of her dead men stood and she would shatter them. That was all there was to it.

The orc tightened the clasps of her helmet and licked her chops. Her personal guard clustered around her, as eager for the fight as she, and Istrid glanced at her seniormost legate.

"Bagram," she announced. "Command's yours."

"Wade in their blood, Knightsbane," the orc replied, flashing fangs.

Just a little too long in doing that for it to be entirely proper, but the old bastard had always been flirtatious. Istrid limbered her aging shoulders with a roll and unsheathed her blade. Ahead of her the lines impacted with a heady fracas and she picked up the pace. Legionaries moved aside for her until all that was ahead was the dead, a teeming mass of pale flesh and steel that came in silent waves. The orc stomped the ground and let out a hoarse yell. A hundred of the same gave reply, greenskins from steppes both Northern and Lesser. Berserkers like her. There were some who said there was no longer a place for the Red Rage, in this orderly little world the Tower was building. No place for the old dumb brutes from the north.

*"Bone and flesh torn asunder,"* she whispered in Kharsum, letting the old words wash over her.

Her father had spoken them, and his mother before her. All the way back to the Broken Antler Horde and the years where Creation had stood in awe of the orcs.

*"Caked in doom and mask of cinder  
Stand ye ever red in tooth and claw  
Like empty, great and gaping maw."*

The old rhyme eased her into it, the way it was meant to. Istrid's body shook with spasms as a scream not her own filled the air. Muscles tightened, bones creaked and the world turned to shades of crimson. The wight ahead of her struck, but so did she

and her sword ripped through bone and flesh, bending steel and smashing it into another undead.

"FORWARD," she bellowed, laughing madly.

And so they went, doom upon all the world.

—

Abigail kept cursing even as the mage healed what was left of her eye. She could still feel the teeth going into her flesh, ripping and tearing as she struggled to get the wight off of her. It said a lot about the day that she was one of the lucky ones. Her entire line had been wiped out trying to steady the fucking Ankouans when it looked like they were going to rabbit: with the guards giving ground her twenty had been surrounded and torn through in moments. If a mage line hadn't burned her a path to retreat, she'd be in some wight's mouth like the rest of her soldiers.

"Cowardly shits," the captain spat. "I hope she hangs them all."

"Unlikely," Lieutenant Salome noted. "And if you continue speaking, I cannot promise you'll ever see again."

Abigail shut the Hells up, though she was starting to have *opinions* about Legion healers. They worked slower than the brothers and sisters at the House of Light and their bedside manner was a lot less pleasant. They weren't as good at healing, either. The lack of gentle persuasion about attending sermons more often wasn't enough of a trade-off for maybe losing half of her total eye supply.

"There," the solemn Taghreb said. "That should be enough. Keep in mind this is a patch job, Captain. Actual restoration would take hours of precision work, and will have to wait until this is no longer an active battlefield."

"I know the triage protocols," Abigail griped. "I sat through the fucking lectures."

The Legions had to be the only army in the world where they made you sit like a schoolgirl after the drills. It was a good thing she knew how to read, too, because it was a requisite if you ever wanted to make tribune. She had her eye on that promotion, as it happened. Officers of that rank weren't expected to be on the frontlines as often, which should do wonders for her life expectancy.

"Legate Hune left instructions for the soldiers that were in your section to present themselves for redeployment," the olive-skinned mage told her. "Try not to get killed, Captain Abigail. It would be a shame for my work to have been pointless."

"You're all heart, Salome," the dark-haired woman drily replied.

Much as she disliked the notion of going back into the thick of it, the Callowan had expected she'd be sent for. Half her company still lived but it wouldn't be headed back to where it had been bled – that space was now occupied by the Fourth, which had come out swinging. And screaming. Gods Above, so much screaming. It must have been an orc thing. The legionaries were turning around the situation there, at least. Their frontlines had been stacked with heavies and they'd slammed into the wights like a runaway cart, gaining back all the grounds that'd been lost in the span of a quarter bell. Now they were carving a wedge into the undead, which she assumed was the prelude to an all-out assault. Abigail made the rounds and collected the remains of her company from the tender attentions of the healers or the grounds where they'd dropped down exhausted before making her way to command. Senior Tribune Locks was the one who met with her, the reason for his ridiculous Legion-assumed name made clear by the dark curls going beyond his helmet.

"We're keeping you in reserve for now, captain," the Soninke told her. "Most likely you'll be joined with another company that took casualties and sent to steady the levies."

*Steadying the godsdamned Ankouans is how I lost half my company, you smug prick,* she thought.

"Looking forward to it," Abigail said, playing up her Summerholm accent so the sarcasm wouldn't register.

She spent half a bell after that standing behind the lines like she was on death row, but she couldn't complain. Better the wait than the fight. She was no tactician, but at the moment she'd wager the judgement that things were looking up for her side. The Fifth on the right flank was still stuck dealing with wights, but the undead were beginning to thin. The Ninth was going through the enemy slower but with fewer casualties, and the Fourth was digging into the undead like this was summer solstice and they hadn't eaten all week. It could be generously said that the centre was holding, though not much more than that. There'd been no glaring fuckups that would require her to be sent back into the mess, and she told herself she'd light a candle in a House for that. As long as it cost copper, anyway. She wasn't putting down silver for the folks Above, not unless she got a promotion and her hooks into a pretty boy that was supernaturally flexible in bed.

She was made to regret the blasphemy immediately.

There'd been a bunch of fancy Wastelanders looming behind the undead since the blades had come out and they'd finally stirred themselves to act. The move they made was on the Black Queen, and Abigail had to give them praise for the balls of it if nothing

else. Catherine Foundling had a reputation for brutally murdering her way through problems, so it was pretty brave of them to so openly embrace that label. Blinding panels of light formed around the Squire in the distance, slowly spinning. Abigail would have looked closer but it hurt her eyes to, and not just because of the light. The shapes she could discern were hardly shapes at all, and even glancing was enough to have the beginnings of a migraine forming. To be honest, she wasn't too worried about this. Trapping the Black Queen was kind of like trying to put a bonfire in a box – it'd work for that short moment until the whole thing caught fire and then your hands were on fire as well and by then it was way, way too late to do anything about it. Unlike some of her dumber countrymen Abigail didn't think there was anything gloriously patriotic about trading a Praesi monster in charge for a Callowan one, but Heavens was she glad to be in the Fifteenth and not in the ranks of whatever poor fucking fools were fighting it.

There was something to be said for being on the winning side, and monster or not Foundling had a history of being the last woman standing on the field.

The thing was, the light panels stayed there. No howling blizzard tore them open. This, Abigail thought, did not bode well. The rest of the army must have agreed because a shiver went through the ranks. Not the old legionaries, they were made of sterner stuff, but the Ankouans were wavering. And the men of the Fifteenth were... It was hard to put into words. You didn't have to like the Black Queen to put your trust in the legend. In the stories about the girl who'd tricked resurrection out of angels and swept her way through armies and heroes alike. Abigail had seen her in Dormer, when she'd raised the stairs of ice and swept the Summer fae off the walls. It had been like watching a force of nature, not a person. Sometimes the captain still woke up with cold fingers even when she slept by the fire. You couldn't see something like that and not believe, even if only a little. *So why isn't she breaking out of the cage?* The Praesi took advantage, and if there'd ever been the history of Callow writ in a sentence that was it.

Abigail had heard stories about the Conquest. Every kid did, not matter where in the country they were raised. But those had been about battles and sieges, cunning ploys and foul deeds. *This isn't anything like that at all*, she thought. Darkness was made smoke above the chanting silhouettes of faraway mages, and that smoke moved. It slithered across the cloudless sky, spreading smoothly like ink in water, and it was only when it reached the army it clustered into a ball above it. Then it exploded again, into a hundred dark tendrils that swept through the centre of the host. Wherever the tendrils passed, men died. Choking and screaming, clawing at their throats as the smoke went into their bodies and poisoned something inside them. Black tears streaked

down their faces, leaving ash-like trails. Abigail's blood ran cold, and in that moment she understood why old men called Praes *the Enemy*. This was not war, it was... She didn't know a word ugly enough for it.

How many had died, over these ten heartbeats? A thousand, at least. There was a gaping hole right in the middle of the army, and already the wights were pouring through. Abigail almost thought she heard a snap, when the morale of the Akouans broke. They were going to leg it, she thought. They guards were going to flee and they were all going to die. The smoke thinned and began to disperse, leaving only a field of corpses behind. That, and one soldier. That one survivor took off her helmet, shook free a ponytail, and the captain's heart caught in her throat.

"Rise," Catherine Foundling ordered, and the dead men obeyed.

The word had been spoken half a mile away, and still Abigail heard it like had been whispered into her ear. Akouans and legionaries rose to their feet, cold blue eyes shining, and the dead fell upon the dead. Something old and harsh rose up in the captain's veins, something she had thought herself beyond. It wasn't pride, because who could take pride in one of their own matching the Wasteland horror for horror? But it was something close to it, when she thought of the sneering mages on the other side who'd swatted down thousands likes insects. *Be afraid*, she thought. *Like we are, like we've always been. Be afraid of the monster coming for you all, because there is not a speck of pity or mercy in her.*

"Kill them all, Black Queen," Abigail whispered hoarsely, and meant every word of it.

—

Sacker watched frost spread across the ground, dead men claw at the dead, and felt her body shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the sudden cold. She'd seen Lord Black in the fullness of his power, turning the men behind him into a sword no army could withstand. This was something else. It was the madness and might of the Old Tyrants turned to sharp purpose, and the part of her that loved the Tribes above all else wept at the sight of it. *O Carrion Lord, what have you wrought?* The Squire was a host unto herself, a wrathful child who'd stolen the mantle of a lesser god and would wreck the world with it until it fit her vision of how things should be. The goblin was a true daughter of the Grey Eyries, daughter and great-daughter of Matrons, and she knew old histories and the dark truths they carried. No Empresses had been so terrifying as the ones that though they were in the right. That thought they were doing the *necessary* thing. The Praesi knelt at the altar of Dread Empress Triumphant — may she never return — and named her the greatest Tyrant that ever was or would be. But she'd been a storm to be waited out, nothing more.

There would be no waiting out Catherine Foundling, she knew. The girl had been taught by the most patient of monsters, and surpassed his greatest weakness. Lack of power.

*Is this to be your legacy, Amadeus of the Green Stretch? Will you leave us with one last laugh at our expense, knowing the world will burn in your wake?* Sacker held more respect for the Black Knight than she'd ever thought she would give either a human or a male, but even so she did not think he deserved a pyre as great as the whole of Calernia. It was all made even more bitter brew by what what she knew, that the Squire would be needed in the wars to come. They needed the likes of her to turn back Procer, to smother the Tenth Crusade in the crib. *I hate you a little, old friend, for the knowledge that you shaped a situation where we would have no choice but to embrace her.* Every inch of Sacker told her that she needed to kill this girl, kill her right now before she crossed a line they could not return from. But to follow her instincts would be to cripple the Empire and the Tribes with it on the eve of the greatest war they had seen in centuries.

The goblin let fear and grief hold her for a moment, before she wrested back her mind. There were orders to give. The rebels had played their hand and seen it fail. It was only a matter of time until Istrid and Orim broke through, and when they did the battle would be good as won. All that remained was to play out the rest of this.

"Raise the banners," General Sacker told her staff. "Heavies in front, mages are to Lob at will. Let's end this farce."

It should have felt like a victory, but all she could think about was what lay ahead. Her people kept to the Gods Below, as the Praesi did, but they had given the oldest face of these deities a name: the Gobbler. It was said, among the Tribes, that when the Creation was born the Gobbler had spewed out all the peoples of the world. The last and smallest of them, crawling from the open and exhausted maw, had been the goblins. It was whispered to the daughters of Matron lines that they had been the last to come and that they would be the last to go. That they would be spared the calamities of greater peoples, hidden away in their deep places.

Watching Winter spread through the dead, freezing and shattering everything in its path, for the first time since she'd been spawned Sacker doubted this truth.

## Chapter 54: Wake

*"I imagine the High Lords would be inclined to protest the mind control, if I hadn't seized control of their minds, which just goes to show this was the right decision all along."*

– Dread Emperor Imperious



I'd believed, once, that the way Black thought was what made him different from his predecessors. The manner he tallied gains and losses, let the numbers guide his decisions instead of more sentimental inclinations. I'd thought it a strange thing, that a man born in Praes could think that way at all. But I'd understood, as I watched a thousand men die in a manner I tacitly allowed as part of an overarching strategy, that it'd been a false perception. Most Praesi thought that way already, when you dug a little deeper. That was the principle behind a sacrifice, wasn't it? Breaking something of worth so it would bring you something else you found of greater worth. A few thousand people for a flying fortress? Well, the Empire had a lot of people but few sorcerous war machines. Tendrils of something eldritch touching your mind for a demon summoning? Power was prized over sanity, when one intended to climb the Tower. My teacher had just taken a concept at the heart of everything Praesi and brought it to its logical, cold-eyed conclusion.

The House of Light said men could be worse than devils, for devils were driven to Evil by their nature and not by choice. That it was greater sin to turn away from the light than be born of the dark. Choice, that was the word the priests exalted above all others. That men had the right to make decisions granted by the Gods and that what they did with this right defined who they were. *For the Children of the Heavens sin is in action, not in birth.* I didn't believe that, not really. Malicia was a monster not because she'd fed a civil war that lasted decades and killed dozens of thousands, but because she was someone who had it in her to *make* that decision. Her sin, if I was to insist on such a word, was that she was a woman with that capacity. Even if she'd become a cloistered sister in southern Callow and never hurt a fly until she died, she would still have that bleak thing within her. Evil was not an act so much as it was a state of mind, a way of thinking I had been raised to despise even against the best efforts of the Imperial orphanages.

But I had the bleakness in me too. It was almost pathetic it had taken me so long to admit to that fact, that it had taken writing off a thousand men under my protection as *bait* before I could no longer deny it, even deep down. I'd sacrificed the Ankouans, and men of the Fifteenth as well, to draw out the ritual Akua's hounds had up their sleeves. I'd have done the same with General Istrid's men or any other of the soldiers on this field, because that ugly bloodletting had seemed to me the path to victory. *Was this what you saw in me, Black? The same absence where better people have qualms.* The decision had been no different – no worse – than sending the vanguard into the jaws of Summer at Dormer or forcing a battle against the full might of the Court in Arcadia. But the selfishness of this one had been bare, beyond even my ability to paint over. It should have grieved me, but aside from dull shame the sight of the dying had done nothing to move me. *If I cannot be kind or just, then I will at least be victorious.*

I had sacrificed my last illusion of being a decent person for a win, and I could not even muster regret at the the thought of that. Maybe Diabolist had spoken truth, when she'd said I'd become like Praesi. The gap between them and me was not as wide or deep as I would have liked. I heard Hune approach through the silence, her heavy footsteps unlike any other, but did not turn to greet her.

"Legate," I simply said. "You have a report for me?"

Ahead of us were the remains of the day. My little necromantic trick, turned from dagger to sword by Winter's mantle, had turned the tide at exactly the right time. While I led my own dead smashing the wights, the legions on the flanks had begun breaking through. Istrid's Fourth had been the first among them, but closely followed by General Orim and the Fifth. Ranker's legion had not been far behind them, a quarter bell at most, and the moment the Ninth was free move the battle had been over. With four breaches in the enemy line their formation had collapsed and then the rebels had grown desperate. They'd fled, of course. Dying for the cause was not a Wasteland virtue. To prevent pursuit Lord Fasili had thinned his centre and thrown everything he could at the marching veteran legions while he and his fellow living escaped. It hadn't been enough. Orim had sent a division of one thousand to delay the wights meant to block him and pursued, only backing down when Fasili threw his last reserve of three thousand wights at the Fifth. Akua's general had brought twenty-three thousand soldiers south and fled with barely two thousand when the Battle of Dead Dawn ended.

To my fury, I'd been unable to engage in pursuit. With the necromancers gone the wights had gone wild, turning on each other as well as my soldiers, but their numbers had not dwindled swiftly enough. I could have followed on foot, or with a confiscated horse. But I'd weighed the gains and losses. If I pursued, there was a chance I could kill Akua's best general. It was not a given I'd be able to, though, since he had hundreds of mages and at least one ward he believed could trap me. If I remained, I could significantly lower casualties on my side by carving my way through the disorganized wights with my procession of dead soldiers. Uncertain greater gain or certain lesser one. A year ago I would have pursued, but I'd been taught the price of recklessness since then. Powerful as they might be, villains who faced armies on their own died to them more often than not.

"Two hundred and thirty-three fatalities from the Fifteenth," Hune said, delicately handing me a scroll. "Twice that many wounded. Numbers are still coming from the other three legions and the Callowans lack even basic registries, but I am projecting at least two thousand dead Ankouans from the debriefs."

A quarter of the initial Ankouan force gone before Afternoon Bell even rang. The colder part of me assessed that, even with the five thousand men from Southpool sure to have been lost, this battle had still seen me come out ahead in the grim arithmetic of war. On the surface, at least. Diabolist could afford to lose more troops than I could. At this rate of exchange, I'd be the last woman standing in my army and she'd still have over a third of hers. Or what we thought was hers, anyway. Inside the walls of Liesse was barred to scrying and trying to guess the amount of people there'd been in the city when it rose into the sky was a logistical nightmare. Refugees didn't exactly declare their intent to travel, nor fae offer casualty reports.

"Then we've decisively proven the Legions can beat wights when the armies field similar numbers," I said after a long moment.

"I would mitigate that statement," the ogre said. "A third of our number were Ankou watchmen. That said, Liesse is a fortified city. The nature of the engagement there will be different."

"You're worried about her mages," I said, hazarding a guess.

It wasn't a stretch to do so. They had me worried as well.

"They will have had months to prepare the grounds," Hune said. "Superior spellpower and numerical advantage will weigh heavily against us, ma'am."

"Superior spellpower," I smiled wanly. "Not something they can claim, I think, so long as we have Hierophant."

"One man," she said.

"One *Named*," I replied.

"They have one of those as well, Your Grace," the ogre reminded me. "Had I not been informed there are temporal concerns at work, I would have advised for a protracted siege instead of an assault."

Temporal concerns, huh. A roundabout way of saying everybody was worried about what Akua Sahelian would be able to cook up if we didn't kick down her front door quickly enough. The ogre's notion wouldn't have been wrong on a tactical level, if we set aside Diabolist. But it would have been a mistake on a strategic one. The longer it took us to put the rebels down, the higher the chances Procer would attack while half the legions were tied up around Liesse. The ogre wasn't high enough up the ranks to be in the know for that, though I'd wager she'd heard some rumours. They were cropping up often of late and I doubted it was a coincidence. The Empress, I suspected, was preparing public opinion for the wars to come. Even if she had a plan in the works that involved never fighting those at all. Malicia was not the kind of woman inclined to leave any of the angles uncovered. I

had no intention of discussing any of that with the ogre, through, so I changed the subject.

"Fasili Mirembe," I said. "Your opinion on him?"

"Skilled," the legate immediately replied. "Clearly studied Legion doctrine in depth. He accurately gauged how long it would take the legions to deal with the wights set against them. His tactical judgement is solid as well. The Ankouans were the correct target for his ritual."

"Terror tactics," I murmured. "He was banking on a Callowan rout to win this."

"They have evidently made plans to limit your ability to act on the battlefield, ma'am," Hune said. "I am somewhat at a loss as to how they were fooled by a decoy."

"That was Thief," I said. "Keep quiet a Name's power and it can be hard to differentiate between them, from a distance. It won't work twice, but it shouldn't need to. Using wards against Masego is like trying to drown a fish."

"I confess a degree of wariness over how heavily we rely on Named for for our tactics," the ogre noted.

She sounded, I thought, almost like my teacher. *Never rely on an artefact or a power for victory. They will always fail you. There is no such thing as being invincible, but lack of glaringly exploitable crutches will do wonders for your lifespan.* There was truth in that, but the number of Named on my side was my main advantage. I would be a fool not to exploit it to the fullest.

"We'll meet him again in Liesse," I said, winding the conversation back to Lord Fasili.

"I would rank him as inferior to most Imperial generals, General Juniper among them," the ogre said. "Though battles are rarely so clear-cut as to allow such gaps in ability to be a deciding factor."

She was right about that. On open grounds with identical armies, it would change quite a bit. But in a massive pitched battle around Liesse? That was a different story. I had faith in the Hellhound, but I did not think she would be better at leading a traditional Wasteland army than an intelligent man who'd been raised to do that very thing. *We still come out ahead by miles when it comes to experienced officers. They'll be dependent on magic to control the wights, and that'll make it hard to manoeuvre quickly.* Juniper had been crafting a plan of attack for Liesse for quite some time now, refining and improving it every day. I would trust in her, as she trusted in me. I silently watched the legionaries piling up corpses all over the field,

preparing the pyres that would be lit before nightfall. Wights broke after they were damaged enough, whatever sorcery animated them ceasing to function, but some of the corpses still struggled as they were dragged away. They would burn anyway.

"Do you think you're a good person, Hune?" I suddenly asked.

"That's a human way of looking at the world," the ogre said. "Drawing lines and saying that standing before or past them defines who you are."

"Then how do ogres think of it?" I said, glancing at her.

The legate smiled thinly, fat lips tightening in a line.

"We are what Creation lets us be," she said. "That we get to decide is the first and oldest lie."

"I was taught differently," I said.

"And how much control did you have over that?" she asked.

She shook her head before I could reply.

"I must return to my duties, Your Grace," she continued. "I leave you to your musings."

I inclined my head in dismissal, not eager to keep her around. I had another conversation ahead of me, after all. As she strode away I sought the six hundred and forty-nine remaining undead I had raised, a writhing bundle in the back of my mind. I could see through their eyes, guide their hands and feet, but there was... danger in that. There were too many, more than I could truly handle. Orders that were more thought than word could direct them as a pack, but if I went any deeper I was certain there would be consequences. A god, perhaps, would not have been troubled by those. But stealing one's mantle had not raised me to godhood: all it had done was allow me to claim some of that power as my own. Safety lay in shallowness. It was my instinct to release the dead from service now that the battle was over, but I thought twice of it. I'd proved in the past that I could go a great deal of damage by filling dead animals with munitions. Six hundred purely expendable troops were too useful of a tool to dismiss without good reason.

"I know you're around," I said.

Thief clucked her tongue, and appeared ahead of me. She was sitting on a dead man's back, though from this angle I could not tell whether it'd been one of mine or a wight. She pulled at a waterskin, looking somewhat ill.

"I'll never get used to the smell," Vivienne Dartwick said. "The reek clings to you, somehow."

"I thought the same after my first real battle," I said. "I barely notice it now, to tell you the truth."

Thief's answering smile was sharp.

"And that doesn't worry you?"

"Not only villains fight battles," I said. "Or have noses, for that matter."

She didn't press the subject, nor I had not expected her to. Talking with Vivienne, I thought, was much like sparring. All deft footwork and probing for weaknesses, a game where victory and defeat were ever moving targets for both players.

"A great victory," Thief drawled. "Should I offer you congratulations?"

"A skirmish," I said.

"Forty thousand men fought on this field," Vivienne said.

"Not even a third of either real armies," I said. "Minor parts of the whole. That makes it a skirmish, no matter how large of one."

"If this was just a skirmish," Vivienne said. "Then why did Diabolist risk her best general?"

My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"I," I murmured, "have been wondering about the same thing."

Looking at all of this, there were parts that weren't adding up. I could generously assume that I'd lost five thousand men today. Diabolist, on the other hand, had lost twenty thousand. Even with the five thousand Southpooleans she would kill and raise, I'd come out of this round ahead by ten thousand souls. It wasn't a horrible trade, for her. The more troops I lost the fewer I had to assault her walls with. *But she sent Fasili, and hundreds of mages. Knowing she could lose them.* Akua never did anything with only one intention in mind.

"The wards they tried to pen me in with," Thief said. "I could have strolled out at any time. They weren't *keyed* to me, if you get my drift."

"You think she wanted to find out if she could put me in a box at will," I said.

"I'm no general," the dark-haired woman said. "But I get the impression that, army for army, she has you beat. What you've got over her is a bunch of Named, and arguably you're the most powerful of them."

I wasn't so sure of that, to be honest. When it came to killing single opponents, maybe, and Named in particular. But Hierophant could wipe a company from the face of Creation without losing his breath, these days. And Archer was, well... Hard to contain, for lack of better term. She was the living incarnation of the proverbial grain of sand in the machinery. Adjutant wasn't overwhelming by himself, but that wasn't his Role in the first place. He was supposed to empower another Named, and though he worked best with me he could serve that function with others as well.

"It would be reckless of her, to risk so many mages just to answer that question," I said.

"If you'd been stuck behind the wards," Thief said, "would this battle have been won?"

I grimaced. Maybe. But then, maybe not. And if Diabolist had wiped three legions and a contingent of the Fifteenth right before our last battle, well, there went my chances of taking Liesse. This campaign could survive the loss of the Ankou city guard. Fourteen thousand legionaries were another story.

"There's too much we don't know for sure," I finally said. "Guesswork and schemes are her bread and butter, we won't be coming out on top if we keep playing this her way."

Thief was silent for a long moment, staring at me.

"You want me to go to Liesse," she said.

I slowly nodded.

"Not to fight," I clarified. "But I need eyes in the city before attacking it. I've tried to seize the initiative repeatedly, Vivienne, but she's always been a step ahead of us."

"It won't be like my last visit there," Thief said. "She knows I'm part of your little band of miscreants. She will have measures in place."

"I know," I said quietly. "I'm asking anyway."

"This is the part," she said, "where you use your eloquence to talk me into this."

I looked up at the blue sky and smiled bitterly. I could manipulate her, I thought. I'd glimpsed levers to pull in our past conversations. I had a grasp on the kind of threats and pressures that would make her cave. But this, the urge to *bend her to my will* that I was feeling in my bones? That was how villains forged the same blade that'd kill them. I didn't know if that sharp instinct was from my Name or Winter, or more

distressingly neither of them at all. But I would not give in to it.

"Do you think you're a good person, Vivienne?" I asked instead.

"Good is irrelevant," Thief said. "There are debts, paid and not. The rest is garnish."

"A hundred thousand Callowans," I said. "Killed and made servants. That, I think, may be the debt of our lifetime. Help me settle it. *Please.*"

Vivienne said nothing at all, and drank from the water skin. She wiped her lips and chuckled darkly.

"I used to think there wouldn't be a need for idiotic heroics, on this side of the fence," she said. "How I miss that assumption."

I didn't push any further. It had, in the end, to be her decision. Anything else and there would be a cost, sooner or later. *I do not want servants*, I thought, the conversation I'd had with Hune on a hill still fresh in my mind. But some part of me whispered that kindness was as much a leash as fear, in its own way, and that what I wanted mattered a great deal less than what I actually did.

"Don't dawdle south," Thief said. "I'll be cautious, and retreat if the danger's too great."

"That's all I can ask," I said, and the matter was settled.

By nightfall, the pyres were burning. A hundred candles of cooking flesh in the night. Thief went north, to the enemy's lair. I had the three legions under General Istrid escort the Ankouans to our mustering grounds, and returned south with the remained of my men. To the Fifteenth, to Juniper and Hierophant and the plans that would make or break Callow.

And, I found out, to Black.

## Chapter 55: Reunion

*"The heart of succession is always murder. The new cannot grow where the old remains."*

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

Four Calamities had gone south, and Scribe with them, but only two awaited on the other side of the fairy gate. I'd not expected to see Assassin, but looking at Warlock and Black standing side by side my heart broke a little. It was the way they stood: slightly apart, as if they expected a larger person to be behind and leaning over their shoulders. Captain had left a gaping hole behind her in more ways than one. Out in the open our greetings



were polite, friendly even, but distant for all that. None of us were inclined to emotional theatrics in front of so many watching eyes. Warlock made himself scarce without bothering to explain, hard eyes lingering on me even as his handsome face smiled without a speck of sincerity, and my teacher silently led me to a tent in the heart of the Fifteenth's camp. Before I even came in sight of it I could feel the wards pulsing, a least two dozen woven together that reeked of coiled and contained violence. Not Masego's work, this. There was a depth and sophistication to it Hierophant had yet to reach.

It was where my teacher had been sleeping, I saw with a start. The inside was sparse and austere, functional Legion furnishings surrounding a standard issue cot. A handful of scrying tools could be glimpsed in a corner, glinting softly in magelight, and the short folding table that stood to the side was flanked by two rickety stools. The second most powerful person in the Empire slept here, and I could have bought everything in the tent with a mere month's salary. I'd never been too inclined to luxuries myself, but Black took it a step further. The tent's flap closed behind us with a quiet swish, leaving the two of us standing in the soft sorcerous glow. I was taller than him now, I realized. By a little more than an inch. How long had it been, since we'd last seen each other? A year, or close. He was still pale in that way that was more corpse-like than Callowan, all the life in him gathered into those eerie green eyes. Named did not get tired the way normal men did, did not feel that burden as acutely, but in the lines of his face I read something like exhaustion.

The silence stretched on for a long time, me looking at him and him looking at me. If we were different people, I thought, he would be embracing me. But that wasn't who we were, so instead his fingers fleetingly touched my shoulder, using the excuse of brushing off lint that did not exist, and I forced myself not to lean into the touch. Those were the lines we lived between, even now.

"I'm so sorry," I said, "about Sabah."

For what couldn't even have been the full span of a heartbeat something like raw anguish flickered across the man's face, before it was whisked away into the void.

"So am I," he said, and there was something almost tired in his voice. "So am I."

I couldn't remember moving but found myself on a stool as Black claimed his own, watching as he broke the clay seal over a roughly-hewn bottle. He poured himself a cup of the red liquor within, and looked askance at me. I nodded and was handed cup of my own.

"Those who leave are met again," he said quietly, the words cadenced and formulaic. "Be it Above or Below."

Our cups clinked dimly and we downed the drinks. It tasted like wine, I thought, if someone had dumped half a bottle of hard liquor in a bad red vintage. I kept myself from grimacing.

"What happened?" I asked. "Last I heard the situation south was under control."

He poured himself another cup.

"I have grown arrogant," he said, and it was not a recrimination so much as a statement of fact. "I was caught up in my own cleverness, convinced I understood the nature of the opposition. So blind a nascent Name escaped my attention, that I failed to realize I was facing perhaps the most dangerous opponent of my long career."

"The Wandering Bard," I said.

Almorava of Smyrna, though now she went by a different name and face. I'd thought her a nuisance and not a threat, when I'd fought against her, a meddler that could help along defeat but never cause it. It appeared I'd been very, very wrong about that.

"You will face her too, in time," Black said. "Do not make the same mistakes I did. No matter how powerful the heroes she will align herself with, she is the greatest threat among the opposition. If she is not contained, she will make you rue that failing."

I studied him silently. The Empress had called him a *raw, bare nerve*. I'd hoped that she was wrong, but there was a shadow in the man across from me that gave me pause. It wasn't the dark spiral of doubt and recriminations I knew best, but something... colder. As if he'd cut away the human parts of him, deemed them useless and to be set aside until the current messes could were fixed.

"It's all right to grieve her," I said. "I do, and I never knew her the way you did."

The dark-haired man's smile was mirthless.

"I will grieve her properly when affairs here allow it," he said. "There will be a funeral in Ater, in a few months. I expect you to be there."

I nodded slowly. He drank from his cup, fingers steady yet somehow fragile.

"I will have to tell her family," he said softly. "I haven't yet. It feels like less than her due to scry her husband for that conversation."

He closed his eyes, finished his drink and the sliver of vulnerability there'd been on his face was gone when the green stare returned.

"I've been spending the last few days reading reports," he said. "You've done well here, Catherine. There are few people that could have so deftly handled the fae."

"The Empress helped me clean up the mess," I replied honestly. "Couldn't have done it without her."

"Another pleasant development," he noted. "I was glad to hear of your cooperation. You will need to rely on her in the future, and she on you."

"You talk," I said, "like you're going to die."

He laughed cuttingly, but the edge did not feel like it was directed at me. Or at him. It was the laugh of a man who looked up at the Heavens with only contempt.

"Oh there's still a few years left in this hide, if I avoid the right mistakes," he said. "There will be dangers in facing Diabolist, to be sure, but I am aware of the stories I must sidestep."

Gods but I was glad to hear that. Because there was a picture that could be painted in Liesse, one that involved my mentor and my rival and the bloody succession that had been the way of villains since the First Dawn. I wasn't... Fuck, I knew Black was a risk. That as long as he lived there would always be limits to how far I could push things with the Tower. But I wasn't ready for him to die. I wasn't sure that I would ever be. It wasn't even just that I felt safer with him, the hazy memory of a warm cloak around my shoulders threaded with the bone-deep certainty there was not a line he wouldn't cross to keep me alive. I worried my lip. It'd been easy to tell Grandmaster Talbot that the monster in front of me was the closest thing I'd ever have to a father, when he was so very far away. It was harder to do it now that he was here with me. It would have been breaking a pane of glass we'd always been careful to keep there, even if sometimes our hands pressed against that divide close enough to feel the other's warmth. *The hard girl with a distant father figure*, I thought mockingly. *When did I become such a hackneyed banality?*

"Be careful," I said, voice rough. "You're still useful to me."

Something like a smile quirked his lips and he nodded. I poured myself another cup to avoid looking at him even if the liquor had tasted like bad decisions, and felt a sliver of gratitude when he changed the subject.

"Diabolist must be dealt with before summer's end," he said. "We had a conversation, you and I, while I was in the Free Cities. About changes that must be had in the Empire."

"I'm not sure the Empress will agree to the kind of changes I want," I said. "I've made promises, Black. I thought I had it under control, but..."

"In Dread Crowned," he said, lips curving around the name of the song my legionaries and thousands more had sung. "A lovely tune. Almost lovely enough one cannot hear the clamour for war under the words."

"I made a deal with her for the vicequeenship of Callow, like you said I should," I told him. "But the Wasteland is *sick*, Black. There's centuries of rot set in. We can't build anything that'll last without clearing it away first."

Because, much as I'd come to like Malicia, I could not help to think that our deal would not survive her. That all it took was a knife in the back by some ambitious High Lord and the armies would march, because the Empress was a creature of pragmatic reason but she was the exception and not the rule. If we were to really, truly make this work then the cabals of scheming highborn had to go. Or it was just a matter of time until another version of the coup in Laure took place, and we'd come too far now for that to lead to anything but rebellion. I hadn't forgotten it wasn't the Truebloods that'd made a grab for power in the capital, when I'd disappeared for a few months. It had been the Empress' own allies, supposedly mine as well. To trust men like them was like throwing tea in the sea and expecting it to turn brown.

"And so, summer's end," Black said calmly. "Procer will not begin their campaign in autumn, not if it means taking the risk of fighting through the winter in foreign lands. We will have until the first pangs of spring to do what must be done."

The tone had been serene, measured. Cold as the Winter running through my veins, and I was not ashamed to admit it scared me.

"And what exactly is that?" I asked.

"Praes," he said mildly, "will be purged. From Court to gutter. I will not allow knives to be bared at our back as we prepare for the greatest war the Empire has seen in half a millennium."

I looked into those pale green eyes and glimpsed the house of steel behind them, grinding wheels of steel that knew no pity or pause. There had been weight to those words.

"The Empress has already broken the Truebloods," I said. "Most of them call themselves the Moderates now, and the rest is on the run."

"Twenty years, I have kept my tongue as Alaya ruled Praes her way," Black said. "She has done much with that time. Won a civil war without ever mustering a single army, and so much more I could never have done in her place. *But it is not enough.*"

His fingers clenched.

"I look west and I see the chosen daughter of the old ways, sitting atop a throne of death and sorcery in naked challenge to the Tower," he hissed. "I look east and I see the remains of the same fools that fought us decades ago, defeated but not yet defanged. Those that kneel may be spared, Catherine. There is still use for them. The rest will burn, and from those ashes we will fashion an Empire that can turn back Hasenbach's crusade."

Strange, how fear could make a moment grow crystal-clear.

"That means going against the Empress," I said. "Is that your intention? Rebellion?"

The cold intensity that had wrought the man's frame went out like a smothered candle and he passed a hand through his hair. It was, I thought, one of the most human gestures I'd ever seen him make. More than his power or his words, the complete control Black held himself with had always been what made him feel unearthly. That made it thrice I'd seen the control slip tonight. It had my stomach clenching.

"No," Black said. "Never that. Alaya rules. But she must understand that the time for long games is past. Praes now faces an existential threat. Compromise is no longer an option."

"And what happens to Callow, in that path of no compromise?" I asked.

"You have a crown," my teacher said. "Let us dispense with the bastard fig leaf that is putting *vice* in front of your title. Your people already call you the Black Queen, Catherine. Take Callow in hand. Deal out justice and authority as you see fit, so long as the kingdom is ready for war."

My blood thrummed. I'd heard that title whispered, by legionaries and sundry soldiers. I'd been very careful not to claim it though. There were implications to it that would undo some very delicate balances that had been struck. But if Black was going to

break those anyway... I did not look forward to it, what it would mean to be queen. The tedious matters of statecraft, the never-ending petitions and burdens on my hours. But who else would I trust to take the throne? I would leave the ruling in hands better fit for it than mine. But I would wear the crown and command the armies. And when peace was finally bought by enough death, I would put down my sword and make ploughshare of it. Find a successor that had the talents of peace I so damnably lacked.

"They won't go quietly," I warned him. "The last of the old breed. There will be blood."

"They should have been put down like rabid dogs forty years ago," Black said coldly. "Their mages conscripted into the ranks, the rebel holdings confiscated and their treasuries used to raise additional legions. For centuries they have hoarded secrets and rituals to use as knives in their bids to power. Let those be used on our enemies instead: the days were dissent could be tolerated are over. All of Praes will fight for the Empire."

*And whatever parts of it refuse will be destroyed,* he did not say. He did not need to.

"You want to turn the Empire into a great war machine," I said. "And it's a tempting thing, I'll admit. Legions boots over ever smug highborn throat. But what happens to it, after the war? If you make a Praes that is all forges and army camps, then it's not going to put down the swords after we win. It'll start looking for another conquest."

I did not mention the possibility that, even after all that, we might still lose. There was no point in having that conversation at all. *Except I'll have to take precautions,* I thought. *Prepare Callow for the possibility, so that it would survive the defeat.* I missed Hakram like a godsdamned limb.

"I imagine I will be dead, by then," Black said. "But Alaya will rule, and you will have learned to do the same. The two of you can make the Empire what it should be. In this I have no regrets."

"Cut out that fucking talk," I sharply said. "You're not dying so easily. If you're helping me make this mess, you're helping me clean it afterwards. There's too much I don't know, Black. Too many gaps in need of filling."

He smiled, suddenly, and for the first time I'd seen him today he felt as young as he looked. His hand hesitantly extended over the table and patted my own before withdrawing. It felt awkward. I wished he'd kept it there longer.

"Do not try to become me," he said. "I was a tool that served a purpose, and that purpose is coming to an end. This Empire will

outgrow me and so will you. To linger beyond that would be to become a crutch, and do disservice to us all."

"You don't get to quit halfway through," I said through gritted teeth.

I hated that my voice broke just a little.

"Oh, child," he said, almost tenderly, and took my hand in his. "Do not grieve this. You will surpass me, Catherine. I saw that in you the moment we first met, that glint in your eyes that was the best of me without the worst."

"This isn't about surpassing anyone," I hoarsely said.

"It always is," he whispered. "I will gracefully leave the stage, when the time comes, and leave it proud of what will come after me. I knew this to be the outcome the moment I began."

I squeezed his fingers and closed my eyes. *No*, I thought. *This is just a story, Black.*

And I'd already proved I could break those, if I was willing to pay the price.

## Chapter 56: Recess

*"And on your grave we shall have inscribed: he was witty all the way into the tiger pit."*

– Dread Emperor Vindictive

Nauk had a whole tent to himself, unlike the rest of our wounded remaining with the host. Unconscious or not he kept his rank. His Senior Tribune had been temporarily granted full legate authority, but no one had ever dared to talk of actual promotion in front of me. All those that could speak of the matter knew me better than that. There was no lit candle inside, but that hadn't made a difference to me in years. I dragged the lone stool in the corner across the dirt and sat on it, eyes stuck on the orc's inanimate form. His breath still rose and fell faintly and the wounds had begun to heal, but there was nothing pretty about it. His left eye was gone, taken by Summer flame along with ear and cheek and a chunk of his dark hair. It looked like a bonfire had devoured half his face, and though the burns were no longer a horror of charred skin they had scabbed green and peeling. This, I knew, he would be able to live with. That kind of scarring was almost a point of honour to orcs. My eyes shifted to the side and lingered on the stump that ended at his shoulder. The loss of his fighting arm would be harder blow.

Prosthetics could be made, I knew. The Warlock had made a hand for Hakram, after Summerholm, and I did not doubt Masego would be

able to make something even more functional now that he had transitioned into Hierophant. But Nauk would forever be a cripple in the eyes of his own, without a Name to make up for his defect. There was much to love in orcs, be it the bone-deep loyalty or the fierceness in the face of peril, but the Clans were not known to be kind to failures – and that was what they would call him for this, I had no doubt.

“I never should have taken you into that fight,” I murmured, brushing back an errant strand of hair. “Neither you nor the Gallowborne. It was arrogant, to think I was powerful to keep you alive.”

I was, in the end, a villain. My power was not meant to be a shield for those I loved. *All I can do is kill the enemy before they kill you*, I thought. But that too would fail in time, like Black had failed Captain. Death could only be cheated for so long no matter how cunning and ruthless and strong you thought you were.

“I’ve been told Pickler visits you every night, after her hours are done,” I told the orc. “The others came too, even Robber. You haven’t been forgotten.”

There were no wards around the tent but there were guards, and when I heard them give way without comment my mind ran down the list of the few people with that authority. Wouldn’t be Juniper or any of the general staff – most of them had ordered a bonfire made away from prying eyes and begun showing up with bottles when Evening Bell rang. I meant to join them, eventually, but I’d come to visit my mistake first. Not Black, either. He’d been scrying generals and court officials all day, and likely would continue until we left for Liesse. That left only three. Hakram, but the approaching steps were too light. Archer wouldn’t have come here at all. And that meant...

“Lord Warlock,” I said calmly, hand withdrawing from Nauk’s forehead.

The Sovereign of the Red Skies was no more bothered by the darkness than me. He strolled casually to my legate’s side, leaving the body between us, and frowned at the unconscious orc. I studied the villain in silence, eyes tracing the sculpted face and fit form that was made plain by his tailored tunic. There’d always been traces of silver in the man’s short hair, and salt as well as pepper in his beard, but I fancied I saw a little more of both now. He was still, I thought, perhaps one of the most handsome men I’d ever seen. An older man, certainly, but that only added to the allure: there was nothing boyish about him at all. The admission was set aside earlier than it used to be, the way I could dismiss Akua’s looks. Some part of me considered the Warlock an enemy, and enemies were not to be blushed over. He did



not reply to my greeting, or call on sorcery. All he did was stand there and look.

"I'm sorry," I said. "About Sabah."

Dark eyes finally turned to me.

"Your sympathy is a shallow thing of little meaning, Squire," he replied. "You knew her for scarcely three years, perhaps a month in all of shared presence. Your grief is pale imitation of ours."

"And yet I still grieve her," I said.

His face twitched, sorrow and hatred mingled. In my veins Winter flowed, the darkness in the room thickening. My mantle craved the strife like a parched man craved water.

"She was always the best of us," Warlock said. "All she wanted was for us to be alive and happy. It made her so very easy to love."

I did not reply. *Tread lightly here, Catherine. Winter had caught the scent of war, and in this it is so very rarely wrong.* The tall man continued to watch me, the silence growing tenser every heartbeat.

"I am trying," the Sovereign of the Red Skies said, "to think of a reason not to kill you right here and now."

"You might not find that so easily achieved," I calmly replied.

I'd come too far to flinch in the face of even a man like this. A slow smirk split the Soninke's face.

"You speak to me of trouble when your soul is one spell away from turning on itself," he said. "Proud little Squire, having learned all the wrong lessons. Did you really think a mantle was so easily claimed? That there would not be *consequences* to usurping a demigod?"

My eyes flicked to Nauk's silent form.

"I am sharply aware of my limitations," I said.

"You are an altar raised to your own ambition, child, and the foundations are *shaking*," he jeered. "You have lied and murdered your way through affairs beyond your understanding. Can you even still suffer the touch of cold iron?"

He laughed sharply, teeth like ivory showing in the dark.

"Perhaps it is too early for that still," he said. "But thresholds must already be growing difficult, yes? Wards stand stone where they were once parchment, your power mercurial where

it was once firmly grasped. You are not more than human, Catherine Foundling, merely *other*."

My fingers twitched, hidden under Nauk's cot by the angle. I felt like reaching for my sword even as the words winded their way into my head. There was an unfortunate stench of truth about them. The edges being turned on me did not cut deep, but my patience was running thin in the face of a berating I had not earned. Or, at the very least, not from *him*.

"You once warned me about lines I shouldn't cross," I coldly said. "I've kept to those terms. And yet here you are, knife on your fucking tongue. Act like even half the man you pretend to be, Warlock."

Power flooded the tent. Not as a spell or an attack – the Sovereign of the Red Skies had simply ceased hiding the sorcery always roiling inside him. Just by standing there, just by being, he was a storm made flesh. My Name's hackles rose in answer, frost touching my shoulders and my shadow deepening into an endless pit. *I stood in front of Hashmallim unbowed, Wastelander. You will not scare me into lowering my head with cheap theatrics.*

"Lines," the Warlock hissed. "You dare speak to me of lines when just by existing you bring death to Amadeus? You stand before me reeking of bargain incomplete, a thing stitched together by blood and ignorance, and pretend you are safe for even a single soul in this wretched world?"

Something bubbled up inside me, and against my will a laugh escaped my lips.

"You blustering fucking hypocrite," I said. "Who are you to cast stones, Sovereign? You're more abattoir than man. Have you ever accomplished a single damned thing by means other than cutting up men? All I can put to your name is death and horror. I have been civil because Masego is family and for some godforsaken reason Black forgives what you are, but do not mistake that for fear, not for a single moment. You think your record cows me? I've bled for it, Warlock, but I have *beaten gods*. All you are is an aging bag of curses."

The cloth of the tent around us withered until it was threadbare and blackened, Winter baring its fangs through my open snarl. The Warlock's eyes dilated, red bleeding into them as the smell of brimstone spread through cold air.

"Hye should have killed you when she had the chance," he said. "He would have forgiven her, eventually. Damn her for having looked only at the hunt."

My fingers clasped around the hilt of my sword.

"Talk is meaningless," I said. "Either act or shut the Hells up."

The Soninke's shoulders twitched and for a moment I thought it would come to violence, my sword already halfway out the scabbard, but in the end the monster stayed his hand.

"My son asked for the life of this tin soldier of yours," he said, tone emotionless. "Have it back, and count the debt of protecting Masego through his transition paid. Watch your step, Squire. If slaying you keeps him alive, you will not live to see winter."

I forced myself to leave, because if I stayed there would be blood. Terror was writ plain on the faces of the two legionaries standing guard outside, and any notion they hadn't heard the argument was dead the moment I glimpsed it. My sword slid back fully into the sheath and I took a deep breath, wrestling down fury I knew to be not entirely my own. My temper was worsening. *Like all the rest*, I thought darkly.

"Everything you heard here is under the Tower's seal," I told the guards.

I lingered long enough to receive stammering assurances from them, then left. Part of me wanted nothing with the bonfire and comrades awaiting, but disappearing into my tent to stew over this wasn't going to improve anything about my night. Even if the mood was gone, I would show up. *Other*, the Warlock had called me. Other than human. Maybe I needed all the company I could get.

—

"You're having another," Hakram bluntly ordered. "It's a little early for morning dew, so I can hazard a guess why you have wet shoulders."

I grimaced but offered up my cup to the orc.

"Could we at least drink something that doesn't taste of burnt orange?" I complained.

I got a few smiles for that, though no laughter. No one was quite drunk enough yet to have reached that place where everything was funny.

"Dhahab is an acquired taste," Aisha conceded.

"*Acquired* is the right word," Ratface drawled. "That bottle is worth twice its weight in gold."

There were ten of us around the crackling flames, and though some of the faces had changed it had reminded me so much of evenings in the War College that I'd ached. Simpler times, though back

then they'd felt anything but. These days whatever didn't involve half a river's worth of blood felt innocent.

"They served this at receptions in Ater," Masego noted. "Though it tasted different then."

"Milkweed extract," Aisha explained, her cheeks rosy. "It's the traditional paired poison."

My Taghreb staff tribune had begun hitting the bottle early tonight and already abandoned the flat stone that had been her seat in favour of lying against the large trunk we were using as a bench. Having traded a cotton shirt and slender trousers for her usual uniform, I got a good glimpse of why Ratface had been stuck on her for so long every time she stretched. The toned curves were hard to notice under the aketon, but now they were in full display. I didn't allow my eyes to linger, though, and the reason why spoke up right after.

"We're roughing it like proper peasants, then," Kilian smiled, cheeks dimpling. "How appropriate."

I expected Archer to make something out of that, but when I looked she was busy trying to discreetly tie Masego's braids in a knot. He kept slapping away her hands, so evidently not a great success.

"Frosted another table talking with Kegan?" Juniper asked, seizing Aisha's cup and watering down her liquor even as she pouted.

"I wish," I grunted. "Got into an argument with the Warlock."

"Were you asking about his s-" Robber started, but Pickler pushed him off his seat with the ease of long practice.

It did not escape my notice he half-leaned into the touch before allowing himself to be toppled. That infatuation had yet to disappear, then.

"Really?" Masego said, coil of lightning forming around his finger just in time for him to shock away Archer from her latest attempt with a flick. "Father doesn't lose his temper often. As far as I know, the last argument he got into was before I was born."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Huh," I eloquently said, nursing the liquor. "Who with?"

I wasn't actually all that curious, but steering the talk away from the fact that I'd drawn steel on one of the Calamities in the middle of my own war camp seemed a solid notion. Even if he'd been fucking asking for it.

"Uncle Amadeus," Masego said. "Uncle wanted him to open an academy for mages, after the Conquest."

"There already is," Ratface pointed out. "There's a track for mages at the College."

Hierophant rolled his glass eyes under the cloth.

"A *real* academy," he said. "He refused, of course. Father had no interest in teaching squalling Wasteland brats."

"The War College has a limited curriculum, it's true," Pickler said, and I noticed a subtle slur to her words. "The Eyries have entire volumes on engineering and alchemy that will never see light of day."

"The spell scrolls at the College are very narrow in scope," Kilian agreed. "And all the more sophisticated treatises are theory, not practical."

"Praesi hoard spells like dragons do gold," Juniper said. "That's always been the way."

I downed the rest of dhahab and reached for an open bottle of wine before Hakram could fill my cup with that sin against tastebuds a third time. I poured too quick, red spilling over the rim, and unthinkingly licked my fingers clean. Feeling eyes on me I turned, and found Kilian watching. I cleared my throat, in a hurry for a distraction.

"That may change," I said. "I've had a talk with Black."

There was a heartbeat of silence, my teacher's name falling like a shroud on the previously light mood.

"Lord Black," Juniper insisted, breaking the silence.

I snorted into my cup and saw a few smiles bloom. I hesitated to call anything about the Hellhound girlish, but the way she got so coquettishly proper about Black came pretty close.

"I call him sir about once a year, that should be enough formality to meet the quota," I said. "Regardless, there's going to be changes in the Wasteland after we clean up the Sahelian mess."

Stillness hung in the air like fog, the fire crackling loudly around us. The quiet was pregnant with words none of us dared say.

"That sounds like murder talk," Archer cheerfully said. "Doesn't that sound like murder talk?"

"It does," Robber said, grinning hungrily in the dark. "And with official sanction, no less. That is going to be a *ride*."

Hakram cleared his throat.

"Enough blade-talk for he night," Adjutant announced. "War will still be looming tomorrow, but then we'll have to be sober."

"Cheers to that," I said, raising my cup.

"A toast," Ratface shouted. "To liquor, obtained by entirely legal means!"

"To victory, fickle bitch that she is," Aisha added just as loudly.

She handed her cup to Juniper long enough to pass the bottle to Pickler, never noticing that the orc poured half of it to the ground.

"To stabbing Diabolist in the face," Archer said. "Like, at least twice."

"To claiming her personal possessions afterwards," Masego contributed.

"If you keep that up, warlock's get, I'll have to adopt you into my tribe," Robber said, placing his hand over his heart.

"That's illegal, they'll have you killed," Pickler noted.

"Then I'll make my own tribe," Robber said.

"Also illegal, will also get you killed," Pickler replied without missing a beat.

"Boss," Robber said, turning to me, "you need to make your own tribe so I can abuse that power most sorely."

My brows rose.

"Congratulations, Special Tribune Robber," I ceremoniously said. "You are the first and only member of the Lesser Lesser Footrest Tribe, by my authority as Vicefuckingqueen of Callow."

"You said I'd go back to just lesser if I behaved," the goblin whined.

"Which you did not," Pickler said, sounding amused.

"Goblins," Juniper sighed, then raised her cup. "To the Fifteenth."

"Boring," Archer catcalled from the side, obnoxiously drawing out the word.

"To making it this far," Kilian said, bringing up her cup before a squabble could erupt.

"To us," Hakram said, and with that sentimental finish we all drank.

The drinks kept flowing after that, and as the hours passed the stillness returned bearing staid tiredness instead of nervous anticipation. We did not speak of plans or war or the deaths to come, however close they may be. We talked like the friends I'd wished to have, back at the orphanage, and that I had found in this strange place along that winding path my life had taken. That the path also took me to dark and ugly places, I could not deny, but once in a while it led to golden nights like this as well – and they almost made up for the rest. When talk finally died down half my friends were asleep, Aisha draped over Juniper's side and softly snoring as the general fondly looked down at her. Hierophant was having a quiet conversation with Pickler as Robber interjected less than helpfully, Archer passed out over the mage's lap. For all that they bickered constantly, it had become plain for anyone to see how close the two of them were. He'd tightened her cloak around her shoulders, earlier, gentle in a way I'd never Masego be with anything but books. I was gazing at the scene, something between happiness and contentment having found me, when Hakram nudged my rib. He inclined his head to the side and I followed the direction, finding Kilian worrying her lip. She rose when she noticed my gaze and I closed my eyes. An overdue conversation, this. I rose to my feet as well, clapping Adjutant on the shoulder, and offered the redhead my arm.

"Let's go for a walk," I whispered.

## Chapter 57: Revolve

*"Men make swords, Heavens the sheath."*

– Callowan saying

The moon was out in full, and though part of me still grew irritated at the sight of the pale orb I'd learned to ignore it. I'd wondered once or twice at why the Winter King had granted me the title of Duchess of Moonless Nights, when his court had such a close association with the same celestial sphere. I still remembered the dream that had followed the usurpation, doubted I would ever forget even a single detail of it, and in it it'd been Summer that wanted to break the moon. *Was that the intent from the beginning? To have it in my very mantle that I would seek to destroy you?* Now and then I had to wonder who had really played who, when I'd tangled with the Deadwood Crown. If my every

desperate gambit had been foreseen by the immortal thing that now ruled the whole of Arcadia, turned to his purposes. I could have lingered on that line of thought, and wanted to, but the feel of Kilian's arm under mine was a reminder of why I'd begun this walk. I would not suffer cowardice from myself, not even in this.

Southern Callow took well to autumn, even at night. Though the shades of orange and gold some godly brush had painted across fields and trees could not be glimpsed after dark, there was an undercurrent of serenity to the country. Of peace, more than anywhere else in my homeland, for these parts had seen less of war than any of the rest. The last two years had been eager in attempting to make up that disparity, though even the worst of Summer was no match for centuries of Praesi invasion. I caught myself sidestepping the heart of this again, and clenched my fingers. The two of us moved in silence, away from the bonfire and closer to a small pond bordering wheat fields. The muddy banks were covered with footsteps from the soldiers who'd come here to fill canteens and barrels, but at this time of the night we were entirely alone. *Except for the frogs*, I thought, sharp ears catching echo of their song. We found a pair of carved stones by the shore, polished by what must have been decades of wind and rain, and sat there without a word.

The wind brushed the reeds ahead of us, and as I watched them I realized I had no idea what to say. A glance at Kilian told me her face was hesitant as well, though the reasons for it were her own. Some part of me thought there should be a physical weight to this, given how serious it all felt, but I found none on my shoulders. Something like a quiet laugh escaped my lips. *Look at us, grim-faced as if the fate of the world rests in the balance of this conversation. Like this isn't two girls of not even twenty summers settling a dispute of absolutely no import to Creation.*

"Would you care to share the jest?" Kilian asked.

For a heartbeat I'd expected her to take my laugh as mockery, but that had been doing her disservice. She was not offended, merely curious. She'd never been the prickly one between us.

"I was considering matters of perspective," I said.

I finally gave in to the urge I'd avoided all night and looked at her properly. She'd trimmed her hair. Last time we'd spoken it had been at the edge of what regulations allowed, but now it was in a clean pixie cut like when we'd first met. She was still, I thought, heartbreakingly lovely. Porcelain and flame framed hazelnut eyes, and the body I knew so intimately radiated a warmth I knew was completely imagined. Winter had seen to that. The mantle had done a great deal more, though. I'd been months since I needed to look at her to know she was there, ever aware of the measure of fae blood she carried in her veins, but as my



power had grown so had that awareness. I was a Duchess, and she unsworn to any of the lords of the fae. There was a whisper in the back of my mind that spoke of mastery, of needing only to reach out and *will* it for her to kneel at my feet. The disgust that welled up in me at that spoiled what enjoyment I'd had of the peace and quiet.

"Great things," Kilian said, "are made up of myriad smaller ones. I do not think import and magnitude necessarily walk hand in hand."

A few sentences traded, and what I saw was our relationship made plain. I stepped away from it, making mixture of retreat and reason, while she stepped forward to bridge the gap at the cost of making herself the vulnerable one. There was, perhaps, expectation I would follow suit. But never demand. Time and distance had allowed me to see the boundaries we'd set more clearly, and the shred of shame I felt over them was well-deserved. There had never been anything equal about this, in what was given or received. The question that had hung in the air for the last few months was whether or not something that had never been balanced could be made so. Speaking with Hakram had broadened my outlook, but little else. I bared the blade first because in the end that was my nature, wasn't it?

"Were you happy?" I asked. "Before."

The redhead smiled, somewhat ruefully.

"You have a trick to tell when people lie, don't you?" she said. "That does seem a mite unfair, going into this conversation."

I looked away, gazing at the pond and the small ripple I could see a fish making as it swam.

"Of all the things that are unfair in this," I said, "I would consider that a lesser measure."

She sighed.

"The point of this," she said, "was never for you to take lash to your back like an Ashuran suppliant. What has blame ever done to mend the world?"

"Ignoring fault is how tyrants are made," I said.

"You are hardly that, Catherine," she said, and without looking I felt her hand rise.

It hesitated, then went down again. I was uncertain whether or not to be glad.

"I was," Kilian finally said. "Sometimes. Others not. We had our conversation because I feared one side would grow at the expense of the other."

It had been kind of her to phrase it so delicately but the meaning was clear enough. Whatever had been good about it, for her, had been giving way to the bad. And I'd hardly noticed, my mind on a hundred other matters. The thing was, I did not have it in me to apologize for that. I wasn't even sure she wanted me to. At the end of the day, my life didn't come first. Neither did the people I shared it with. The lines I was willing to cross to ensure both of those were preserved had only grown in number, but that part of the matter remained unchanged. *Because there's a difference between important and important to me.*

"You did most the talking, last time," I said. "So I'll get the wheel moving tonight."

I itched to pick up a stone and toss it into the pond, anything to break the damned stillness that smothered the air around us, but I'd done quite enough running for the night.

"It was hypocritical of me to hold you up to standards that I break myself," I admitted. "Standards I don't even hold up everyone close to me to."

Kilian brushed back her bangs, face wearing an expression I could not quite read.

"You thought well of me," she said. "And so you thought I kept to the same principles as you. That's not a crime, Catherine. It was just..."

"Presumptuous?" I suggested, a mirthless smile stretching my lips. "I placed expectations on you, then grew angry when you didn't meet them. That's on my head and no one else's."

Ferreting out exactly why I'd had those in the first place had been more delicate, the kind of introspection I was always reluctant to delve in. It hadn't been that I cared for her, or at least not just that, because I cared for other people too. If Masego had spoken of a ritual fuelled by human sacrifice, would I have been angry? Yes, absolutely. But it would not have felt like a betrayal, the way it had with Kilian.

"I used you," I said, tongue stumbling on the ugly word, "as a refuge. From all the dark shit that goes on in my life. And that meant I wanted you to keep your hands clean regardless of what you actually want. Or need."

I felt her eyes lingering on me but did not meet them.

"I hadn't thought you would actually admit that," she said.

The faint surprise in her voice was probably the deepest cut she could have made, because she hadn't meant it to be one at all.

"You once told me one of my virtues is recognizing when I'm wrong," I said. "It's fallen a bit to the wayside, lately, but it's not gone."

I'd made a lot mistakes, in the last two years. Won great victories too, but one did not excuse the other. I'd make more, because I had talents but also flaws and no matter what Warlock said in the end I was only human. But at least I could stop making them out of wilful ignorance. It wasn't as much as I wished it could be. But it was what I could do. Power alone was never enough.

"I was not blameless, if we have to speak of it that way," she said. "We did not have a conversation, last time. I'd made the decision before we ever spoke, and that was unfair to you."

I nodded slowly. Silence followed, until I pushed forward.

"So what do you want, Kilian?" I asked quietly.

A lot could have been avoided, I thought, by asking that question a few years ago.

"Catherine, *look at me*," she hissed.

Her emotions were roiling. I could feel that with my sense that wasn't quite a sense. But it was in her voice I read the anger, and it surprised me enough I obeyed. She was, I realized, genuinely furious.

"Don't do you fucking do this," she said.

Irritation flared up.

"Do what?" I bit out, exasperated. "Amends? Gods, Kilian, I'm *trying*. What more do you want?"

Her cheeks were flushed red, and for a moment I felt like kissing her. It passed.

"You're not trying," she said. "You're treating me like someone you have to bind to you. I'm not Hakram, Cat. Or Aisha. I *know* you. And this is what you do when you bring someone into the fold. You're acting like I'm the enemy, not the girl who shared your godsdamned bed for two years."

"I know a lot less about that girl than I thought I did," I flatly replied. "I'm-"

I bit down on my tongue, took a deep breath.

"No," Kilian said, eyes hard. "We're not doing it like this. Like I'm a horse you have to soothe or a hound you have to feed. I'm not interested in the Squire, Cat. She has no place in this conversation."

"I don't know what you want from me, Kilian" I hissed. "I just tried asking and you bit my fucking head off."

She met my gaze, the demand that I not look away laying bare.

"Do you really need that badly to be in control, even for this?" she asked. "Gods Below, Cat, there's no one else here. Would it cost you that much to allow yourself to be a person for an hour?"

"Yes," I said, and I was surprised by the fury in my own voice. "Because people *break*. People have limits. I can't have that anymore, Kilian, not when I'm making pacts with the Empress and planning wars with Black. *Legends don't blink*, and if I'm anything less than that we are *fucked*. Because they're stronger and they have decades on me and Weeping Heavens, this entire Empire is a house of cards and everybody's tugging at it. I am in over my head, I always was, and it is *this* close to catching up with me and everyone I've dragged into this."

The only sound in the silence that followed was my panting breath, paired with the unpleasant realization I'd begun to speak furious and ended up pleading. I passed a hand through my hair, exhausted in a way my body no longer allowed me to be.

"I can't do this, Kilian," I whispered. "There are no good choices anymore, just a spread with different shades of horror that I'm forced to pick from. Every time I think it's coming together another thing drops and I have to become a little worse to deal with it. By the time I finish what I set out to do, I'll be more poisonous than what I wanted to break. And I can't back out because the alternative is *every single one of you dead*. And you know what's the part that actually grieves me? I did this. I got us here in this mess, and I would do it again. Because this is bigger than me or you or the others, and if that's not ritual sacrifice by another name then I don't know what is."

All hail the Black Queen, I thought bitterly. I'd already put thousands to the sword to get here, what were a few thousand more for the pile? Blood was the grease in the wheels of Creation, and whose it was they cared not. Kilian reached over and slid her fingers through mine. I let her, though I knew I'd regret it.

"You are not alone," she said.

Of course I was. *Because at the end of the day I have the power, I have the authority, and no amount of love can fit two people on a single throne.* I parted our hands and rose to my feet, brushing off my knees.

"Your ritual," I said.

"Tonight doesn't have to be about that," Kilian said.

"It already is," I replied steadily. "I have no grounds, as either the Squire or the Vicequeen of Callow, to tell you not to do it."

The redhead frowned.

"And yet you still find the very notion repulsive," she said.

"This isn't about me," I said. "That was the mistake from the start, thinking that it was. I will, one day, grind that practice into nonexistence. Because it offends me, because it is a blight on Creation and the way of thinking it spawns is my enemy. But until then, it is against no law or regulation. Do what you deem best."

Her face went blank.

"That sounds," she said, "like goodbye."

"I love you," I said. "I've never said it before, not like this, but I do. It didn't really sink in until I saw the amount of principles I was willing to break to keep you."

A shiver went through her frame.

"Is that supposed to make this better?" she said, voice raw.

"It was due, regardless," I said. "You were always the one that reached out. But this was about being equals, wasn't it? I don't think that means power, or titles, or authority. It's about neither of us being expected to bend our knees to the other's beliefs."

My hand rose, going for her cheek, but she shook her head.

"Don't," Kilian said. "Not if you're going to excise me out of your life. It would be crueller than just walking away."

"I'll still care for you," I said quietly. "That's not going away. We are friends."

The redhead smiled bitterly.

"You bloody fool," she said. "Do you really think *friends* is what I want from you? Getting just a part of someone after having had all of them can't be counted anything but a loss."

I almost took it back, right there and then. I could still do it, I thought. Salvage something out of this mess. But I didn't. I felt like weeping for what I was giving up on, but it'd been a

long time since I'd been in tears and I wasn't sure I still could. My mantle and my Name woke, intertwined beyond separation, and I could have shunted all this... tangle off into them. Let the cold clear it all away. But I was not yet so far gone, and so my hand came down instead. I did not say goodbye. It was too cheap and end for this. Instead I bowed my head, and left. Grace had never been my strength, and there'd been precious little of that on display tonight. I found my feet taking me back to camp instead of the bonfire, where I knew Hakram would be. I had no taste for the conversation that awaited there, would not for a long time. Instead I found a tent, still lit with magelight even at this hour, and let the wards wash over me as I entered. Black was seated on one of his rickety stools, his thin shirt for only armour as he poured over papers arrayed before him. He took one look at me, then let out a breath that was almost a sigh.

He leant back to claim a cup from his bedside and filled it with the wine at his table, pressing it into my hands. I could have sat across from him, but instead I went on his bed. I folded my knees against my chest and cradled the cup. I barely remembered what it had felt like, to be a child, but it must have been something like this. He did not speak, but neither did his eyes return to the papers.

"I met Ranger," I heard myself say. "She almost killed me, in Arcadia."

"So I've heard," Black said. "She is... difficult at the best of times."

It was not an apology, nor had I expected one. The Black Knight did not apologize for himself, much less others.

"But you love her," I said.

He inclined his head in agreement.

"I have, on occasion, thought of it as a singular obsession," he said. "But perhaps that is merely as close to love as I can manage, given what I am. It is enough for the both of us."

"Why?" I asked. "Why do you love her?"

He smiled faintly.

"I have wondered the same for many years," he said. "I have loved – still love – others, but never quite in that manner. In the end, I think it is because she does not need me."

I drank from the cup, a bitter Wasteland red that lingered on the tongue. I was glad of it, in no mood for sweetness.

"Does it get easier?" I asked. "Carving away pieces?"

Pale green eyes met mine.

"Yes," he said.

It was a lie. We both knew that. But I loved him a little, for saying it anyway.

The last part I remembered of that night was my father's hands putting a blanket over me.

## Chapter 58: Hard Measures

*"And so Subira of the Sahelians slew Maleficent and said: 'Emperor am I now, Sinister of name and deed. Let this be the truth of our empire, that iron ever sharpens iron 'til the last cut is made.'"*

– Extract from the Scroll of Thrones, second of the Secret Histories of Praes

There was a House of Light standing at the heart of the largest Praesi army in a century. The irony had amused me more than it should, and the sharp taste of it on my tongue had driven me to make the temple my headquarters for the night. There'd been no one to contest my decision: the lone sister remaining of the priests who'd once tended to the village now swallowed up by tents and palisades was out. Among the legionaries, I was told, tending to the wounded and the sick. I could admire the dedication, though she'd find few soldiers willing to allow her ministrations save for those of my Fifteenth. Praesi had a deep abiding distrust of anything that claimed it came without strings attached. Misplaced wariness here, but common sense in the Wasteland.

"By the pulpit, please," I told the legionaries.

A pair of broad-shouldered orcs set down my gloriously comfortable fae seat before the low wooden frame, casting uncomfortable looks at their surrounding. There was hardly anything to look at, this village being too small to even warrant mention on most maps. The House had been built in the style of the central plains anyway, instead of the more ornate Liessen ways. Walls of wood and clay, a single window in the back that was nothing more than a hole bare of glass or shutters. There wasn't even an adjoining backroom for the priests to sleep in – only a house more hut than cottage huddled up against the wall outside. A third legionary, this one bearing captain stripes on her shoulders, lingered by the pulpit with my writing tools in her hands.

"You can set those down," I said. "I don't believe we've met before. You're one of Hune's, right?"

"My cohort serves under Legate Hune, yes," she agreed, the thick Summerholm accent making it plain where she was from.

She grimaced.

"Ma'am, are you sure you wouldn't prefer your tent?" she asked.

*They know where my tent is, I thought. They'll be watching it.*

"Captain," I began.

"Abigail, ma'am," the woman provided.

"That will be all, Captain Abigail," I said gently. "You may go."

The Callown sharply saluted, half her face rosy in that way flesh tended to be after protracted mage healing. All the way up to the eye, I noted. She must have fought in the skirmish against Fasili and his wights. The pair of orcs followed her after dismissal, joining the contingent of guards that would be outside, and I let myself fall into the cushioned seat. Out of habit I pushed the inkpot and quill to the right side the way they'd taught me at the orphanage, reaching for a sheath of parchment and unrolling it. The soft calf skin had seen use before, though without Name sight I would never have noticed the hints of words that remained on it – whoever scraped the skin had done thorough work. Calmly, I opened the buttons of my shirt and reached for the three documents I had been keeping on me ever since receiving them. One was from Malicia, though not of her handwriting. The second bore Thief's hasty scrawl and the third was a hand I knew more than passingly, Ratface's. All of them bore names. Setting the three ahead of my own parchment I inked my quill and began to write. Two columns, the first for those that were in more than one document and the other for the single mentions. I blew carefully on the ink after finishing, and only then paused. Seven names from the first column were given a mark. Those I let dry on their own, settling into the seat and waiting for Hakram. Adjutant, ever a prince among men, did not make me wait for long.

"Masego says it's all ready," the orc told me without bothering with niceties.

I approved. This was not going to be a good night for those.

"And he's certain it won't be detected?" I asked.

The tall greenskin snorted.

"He thought you'd ask that," he said. "Should I give you the answer he prepared?"

"I assume it's very condescending," I said.

"Almost poetically so," Hakram grinned.



The flash of fang he bared was low, close to the lips and paired with eye contact. That, I had learned, usually meant amusement in an orc. Though not all of them, to my irritation. The clans from the Lesser Steppes kept to their own strange customs. He lingered after, and I drummed my fingers against the pulpit.

"Out with it," I said. "Do you need more men? Because there's only so many I would count trustworthy, and I don't want to dip into the Broken Bells for that."

"Forty is plenty," he replied. "Truth be told, I want to keep the second line you gave me after the business is over, if it can be done. I have too many irons in the fire these days for the number of hands I can command."

"I'll talk to Juniper," I said. "But Nauk's command was gutted in Dormer and Senior Tribune Jwahir is low on veterans, so I wouldn't count on it for a few months."

I raised an eyebrow after that. Another line under his command was very clearly not what he'd wanted to talk about. My mood turned sour when I remembered another matter I'd recently slid under his purview.

"Wait, is this about Nauk?" I said. "I thought that was going fine."

He shook his head.

"Hierophant took a look, like you asked," the orc said. "He'll be awake in a week, up and about in a month. You can leave that to me, Cat. I'm just worrying about our... timing."

"It had to be tonight," I reminded him. "The assault starts come morning. If we'd done this earlier she would have had breathing room."

"There are officers on that list," Hakram said, and it was not a question.

"Highest is a tribune," I replied.

Confirmation from Thief and Malicia. That one had stung more than I'd thought it would, given that he'd enrolled back in Ater.

"I dislike what this'll do to our chain of command," he bluntly said. "On the eve of the largest battle we've ever fought, no less."

"You can't seriously be suggesting we just leave them there," I said, appalled.

He sighed.

"No, not that," he said. "I just wish we'd done this early enough the replacements would be settled. Before you begin, I understand why we didn't."

"The wager's that we'll gain more than we lose from this," I said. "I stand by it."

The orc looked away, the thoughtful look I caught first eminently strange on a greenskin's face.

"It's been a long time coming," he finally said.

"I wish it was a masterstroke," I admitted. "It's why we delayed so much. But even now it's just spring cleaning, isn't it? We won't be getting all of them."

"I doubt there's a single army in the world that could boast *that*," he ruefully said. "Perfect is foe to functional."

A saying translated from Kharsum, that, though there was one much like it in Callow. Still, I silently admired the fact he'd managed to put alliteration in there through a language barrier.

"It won't be pleasant work," I said.

As close to an apology as I could offer him.

"Pleasant's herding aurochs back home," Hakram said. "We chose different lives, you and I."

I inclined my head.

"Good hunting, Adjutant," I simply said.

What his lips bared was not a smile so much as a row of knives. He left me to my thoughts, and though my mind was spinning it never lingered on any single thread. There were too many moving parts ahead, though thorough planning should see to the worst of it. It began in truth when Grandmaster Talbot was ushered through the door, an hour before Midnight Bell. The nobleman – as a knight he still qualified as that, even though his family's ancestral holdings were now my own demesne – was impeccably arranged even this late, dark locks combed and his beard without a single hair out of order. The cloak on his shoulders I nearly raised an eyebrow at, though the black and bronze I saw were the colours of the Order and not of House Talbot. It still looked more decorative than truly useful, but wasn't that always the way of highborn? He knelt smoothly before the pulpit, and if he'd taken any offense to a villain using holy site for writing desk there'd been no trace of it on his face.

"Your Grace," he said. "I come as summoned."

"On your feet, Talbot," I said. "I've never had much fondness for kneeling, mine or otherwise. I have work for you."

He rose as elegantly as he'd gone on his knees, but now I saw sharp attention in his eyes where before there'd only been curiosity.

"It was my understanding that the assault would begin with Morning Bell," he said.

"It will," I said. "That's not what I want you for. Or the Order, to be more precise."

"We are ever at your disposal, Your Grace," Brandon Talbot said.

Noblespeak for having not fucking idea what I was talking about, and I was glad of it. If they saw me coming... I'd kept my preparations light and quiet, but Akua had always been the better hand at this game.

"I have a list of names for you," I said. "When you return to the Order's encampment, you will rouse your men and proceed through the Fifteenth to arrest everyone on it."

The man's eyes widened.

"You have found traitors in the legion," he said.

"Most of these I've known about for months, if not years," I said calmly. "I've had Adjutant hunting for them since before he even had his Name. The intent was to watch who they came in contact with, but Diabolist has been very careful. In the end I had to rely on other eyes."

"And now you would purge them before engaging the Wastelander," Talbot murmured.

It wouldn't be all of them, of course. She'd have more, carefully hidden under instructions to lay low. But by killing what I hoped was the majority of her agents when she had no time to replace them I'd be either crippling or ending whatever scheme she had prepared. It took more than a handful of spies to carry out a plan, no matter how well-placed. I folded the parchment I'd written on and held out my hand. He hesitated before coming forward and taking it, eyes lingering on my fingers. I smiled discretely. I remembered enough of my etiquette lessons to know nobles weren't supposed to taken anything directly from the crowned head of Callow, and it was almost charming he kept to that even now. Grandmaster Talbot opened the parchment and read through, expression growing grimmer the longer he did.

"There are more than I would have believed," he said. "And Callowans among them."

"I doubt they knew who they were selling the information to," I noted. "She'll have used Callowan or Duni intermediaries. The names in the second column gave intelligence, but should not be considered agents. Just treasonous."

"Tribune Katlego," he said, eyebrows rising in surprise as he studied the first column closer. "Second in rank among Legate Hune's officers, I believe."

"I'm told hostages were taken," I said.

The Empress had written as much. But he'd folded instead of going to me, and so on the list he went.

"That is the reason there is no mark by his name," I added after a moment.

"And those have meaning, I take it," the man said.

"Those seven officers," I said mildly, "are going to resist arrest. They will, unfortunately, die in the struggle."

The knight's face went still and he studied me silently.

"Trial would be inconvenient, even with a military tribunal," he said.

"They have relatives in the Legion," I said. "Or connections at court. This will make fewer waves."

"This is murder," he said.

There was no condemnation in his voice. It was easy to forget, sometimes that while the nobles of the kingdom had been no High Lords they'd been far from being babes in the woods. Callow was no stranger to knives in the dark. His words had not been question but statement of fact, and I did not deny them.

"So it is," I agreed. "See it done promptly. Supply Tribune Ratface has a man outside, awaiting you with details on the location of everyone on the list."

Brandon Talbot folded the parchment and slid it inside his doublet before putting his palm over his heart and bowing.

"By your leave, my queen," the Grandmaster said.

I met his eyes, and did not correct him. I had few advantages over my enemies, I thought as I watched him leave, but the Order of Broken Bells was one of them. Callowan loyalists who'd been in hiding until a few months ago, and had hardly left my sight since. They were near certain to be free of infiltration and unlikely to balk at the killing of Praesi. It would not be entirely quiet work, of course. The knights mobilizing after dark

would draw attention. I was counting on it, because there were very few mages on that list. Not nearly enough to explain how quickly Akua was made aware of my movements. Which meant there were more hidden, and like good spies they would report the ongoing purge to their mistress. At which point their locations would be caught by Maesgo's ward, and Adjutant would take them. A scheme, I had been taught, should always have more than one payoff. *I was slow in learning, Akua, but I have learned.* The lists I had received from others I put to the flame. I sent for legionaries and had my seat and affairs removed after, though I did not leave the House. I sat on a wooden bench close to the entrance, little more than a carved log, and waited.

As the hours passed I received reports, some more pleasing than others. The Broken Bells had killed twelve, not seven as I had ordered. Whether Talbot had taken this occasion to settle some scores with an excuse or whether those had been genuine accidents, I would have Hakram find out tomorrow. Adjutant caught two mages trying to reach Diabolist, one a lieutenant and Duni as well. *We found the sloppy and the scared,* I thought. *The truly dangerous ones did nothing at all.* I had considered, when planning this, snatching the lot of them from the gallows as I had once done with deserters in Summerholm. But I still remembered flames and Summer's wrath, the soldiers who'd died screaming for me, and found I did not have it in me to do it. Whatever the Gallowborne had begun as, they had been *mine* in the end. I would not forge them anew out of dross like this. It was near First Bell when the reports trailed off, and in the wake of that end I dismissed my guards. Returning to my tent felt like a chore, and so I simply rested my head against the wall in the corner of the House. I knew, closing my eyes, that Adjutant would have people close by. It was enough.

I closed my eyes, and sleep found me. An eternity later, I woke to a soft hand on my shoulder.

"Dawn approaches, my friend," a woman's voice told me. "The Legions have sounded assembly."

I'd been entirely awake from the moment I was touched, and drew back the hand that had gone for my sword out of habit. There was a woman standing at my side, barely out of girlhood. Her fair hair was kept in a thick braid, and her robes were simple. *The sister,* I thought. I was surprised they'd let her in at all, with me asleep. From the corner of my eye I glimpsed a legionary sitting in another corner, and while the sister turned away I dismissed him with a nod. One of Hakram's? Most likely.

"There's time yet," I said.

The woman laughed softly.

"I did not think the Legions so lenient," she said. "You must be an officer."

*She doesn't know who I am*, I realized. I was not wearing armour, and my clothes were well-made but nothing ostentatious. My blade was a longsword, not standard issue, but a priestess might not have noticed that.

"I am," I replied amusedly. "It's going to be a long day, regardless. A few moments of respite will not be begrudged."

"May I sit?" the sister asked.

"It's your House," I shrugged.

"Not mine in the slightest," she said, though she sat at my side regardless. "I was glad to hear the Fifteenth does not forbid worship of the Gods Above. Places such as these should be refuge to all, no matter their oaths."

"The Empire's never been heavy-handed with the priests," I said. "No reason General Juniper should be different."

"Or the Black Queen, I suppose," the sister mused. "We do live in interesting times."

I snorted.

"No denying that," I said. "Maybe a little less troublesome, after today. With the Diabolist gone the work of fixing this country can begin."

The priestess smiled to take away from the bite, but shook her head in disagreement.

"Will it?" she asked. "Evil warring on Evil cannot result in Good."

I laid back against the wall, eyeing the light peering through the hole ahead. I had at least an hour left, long enough to wash and eat before muster.

"I was told never to argue philosophy with the sisters, when I was a kid," I said. "But that seems too dismissive by half."

"I care little for arguments," the sister said. "But discussion is one of the tools the Gods granted us to make the world a little brighter."

"Shall we discuss then, Sister?" I teased.

Her face grew serious.

"Saving one soul is saving all of Creation," she said.

From the Book of All Things, that. One of the more sentimental quotes, and not one I put much stock in. Even if Malicia embraced the Heavens tomorrow, the Empire wouldn't change in the slightest – save maybe with the addition of her blood on the floor.

"Ah," I mused. "Hard to have a discussion with that premise, isn't it? I don't really think we believe Evil to be the same thing, when it comes down to it."

"Then teach me," she said. "I would not close my ears to the truth."

"You know, I was raised on the same stories as you," I said. "I used to believe that Evil was mostly about a good ol' rousing round of hangings and sundry blood magic."

The blond priestess smiled gently.

"But you don't anymore?"

"You could say I've had the benefit of an extensive education on the subject," I replied. "The way I see it, Sister, Evil is about refusing to play by the rules of the game."

She frowned. It was a pretty look on her, as I imagined most were. It would have been a lie I didn't find something attractive about purity, though power had always been what I preferred.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," she admitted.

"It think starts with asking *why*," I said. "Why should I forgive? Why should I not kill? Why should I obey? And eventually you realize that there's all these rules handed down to you and then you get to the real question – why shouldn't I just do whatever the Hells I want?"

I chuckled, the sound of it resonating in the near-empty House of Light.

"That's when you realize the answer's pretty simple: because someone thinks I shouldn't, and will stop me if I do."

I let out a long breath.

"Most people stop there and become a minor league sort of evil. That one jackass in every village that always talks shit, the merchant that short-changes you or another corrupt judge."

My fingers idly closed around the pommel of my sword, thumb rubbing the leather wrap around the handle.

"But once in a while, you get someone who doesn't flinch. Who decides it's not enough, and replies: try me. And then they pick up a sword."

I met her eyes and offered her a half-smile.

"That's Evil, I think – walking past the line in the sand and refusing to apologize for it."

The look on the Sister's face was unreadable.

"You sound proud."

I shrugged.

"Proud is a strong word," I said. "But it's been some time since I was ashamed of it."

"Strange," she said softly. "You did not strike me as someone who would embrace fear."

It was my turn to frown.

"I think you might have missed my point."

She shook her head.

"The way of thinking you just described assumes that the world around you is your enemy. That is not courage, it is *fear*."

I laughed.

"Look around you, Sister. The Diabolist is stealing cities, the Principate is marauding near the borders and just two years ago the south was in open rebellion. The world is full of enemies."

"Because you treat them like one," she told me seriously. "If you solve all your problems with swords, swords are the only reply you will ever get."

"That's a nice sentiment," I replied, "but it'll be cold comfort when the Procerans invade."

She sighed.

"Ah, borders. I've never quite understood why they matter so much to people. You draw imaginary lines on the land and tell people to remain on one side, as if ink and parchment could make you its owner."

I had quite a few scathing things to reply to that, but since she'd been polite enough to let me speak uninterrupted I supposed I should afford her the same courtesy.

"Do you know why the House of Light does not preach rebellion against the Empire? Because it doesn't really matter, whether we have a king or an empress. Rulers come and go, but what really matters doesn't."



I raised an eyebrow.

"And what would that be, exactly?"

"Trying to be better," she told me, and passion shone in her eyes. "No one is born Good. It's something you have to work for every day, and sometimes it can seem like more trouble than it is worth – but what else is there?"

She leaned forward.

"So many of us see life as a race and will do anything to pull ahead, but that is the conceit of a child. If we all cross the same finish line the only thing that matters, the only thing that can matter, is *how* we get there."

I grinned, but it was more a show of teeth than mirth.

"Sentiment like that is how they get you every time, Sister. So what if we all cross the same finish line? Down here in the mud is what really matters. What we make of it. And if I only have so much time kicking around Creation, then I'm the one who's going to decide how it's spent. Not the Gods, not whoever's got a crown, *me*. I own my life, and damn anyone telling me I need to live it abiding rules that are just a key to the other side."

She met my eyes, unafraid.

"Life is what you share with others," she said. "Hoard it and you will die all the poorer for it."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated that she just wouldn't see what I saw.

"You don't even get to set the rules you live by," I said. "You're a leaf spun in the wind deluding itself into thinking as long as it behaves it'll land somewhere nice."

She smiled, eyes gentle and sad. The kind of eyes you gave someone who was so far lost they didn't even remember what the path looked like. Her pity burned me harder than Summer's flame ever had.

"And you think your way will let you choose where you land?"

My mantle roiled under my skin, the weight of all the choices I had made and would make, the sum of what I was and would be.

"That's where you're wrong, Sister," I told her, "I don't want to be the leaf – *I want to be the storm.*"

She laid a gentle hand on my wrist.

"In the end," she murmured. "I choose to believe that being Good matters more than being strong."

"In the end," I replied clearly, "I would rather be wrong than be cowed."

And what more was there to say, after that? I rose, letting her hand fall away.

"Be safe," she said. "There are great dangers about."

I smiled, feeling a sliver of grief for all that this was.

"Oh, Sister," I said. "All those dangerous people? I'm the one they answer to."

## Chapter 59: Anacrusis

*"Peace is a fine thing, but war is the crucible of crowns."*  
– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

There was something oddly intimate about being dressed, even if it was with steel instead of skirts. It began with the grieves, Hakram kneeling at my feet to tighten the straps. He was tall enough there was need of stool to put my foot on, since even kneeling he still reached near my chin. He had clever fingers, belying their size, and though he was not gentle he was quite meticulous. Then the *pua*, the long thigh and lower leg piece with an articulation at the knee. Over my aketon I put on a shirt of mail in the legion style, six interlocked rings spreading into a thick cover, and as he reached out for the vambraces I set the breastplate over the mail myself. The straps were hardened leather, reinforced with iron, and they creaked as I tightened them. I held out my arms for him to fit with the vambraces, watching his face crease with concentration. Pauldrons followed, marked only with the Miezan numerals of the Fifteenth instead of the heraldry and titles that were gathering to me like flies to honey. Armguards were adjusted to my comfort and articulated gauntlets finished the portrait. The fingerbends looked like fins, I'd always thought. There were usually stained red by the end of a fight, with either my blood or my opponent's. The gorget clasped tight around my throat, and though uncomfortable I knew better than to whine. I'd killed enough people through the throat to know leaving it open was sheer stupidity.

I'd expected to be presented with my old open-faced helmet as the last of steel to bear, but what I was offered was different. This one was not of Legion make, with hinged cheeks and a flat noseguard in front. It had a long tail to cover the back of my neck, true, but there was a flap in the back through which my ponytail was meant to go. The cheeks were fully covered, going into a long angled mouthguard crafted so it would rest against my

gorget. The strip of steel that served as nose-guard was shorter than I was used to, and above it was a ridge of steel meant to prevent blades sliding down into my exposed face. What had been forged above the ridge was what had me frowning: it was a crown. Black iron set into the helmet, not jutting, but a crown nonetheless. My eyes flicked to Adjutant.

"You know I do not wear ornate armour," I said.

"I know your teacher does not," the orc said, and pressed my palm against the steel. "It is not him we follow."

*This isn't a squire's armour, I thought. It is a queen's, and her crown is black.* For all that I had avoided the regalia of my rising rank, it seemed it had finally caught up to me.

"Vicequeen," I reminded the orc.

"For how long?" he asked quietly.

I winced. Months, perhaps a year. But Black was not one to go back on his word, and he'd given it. A crown for me, so long as I readied Callow for war. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time to get rid of the fig leaf. Past a certain point reticence was more arrogance than humility. Or, even more to my distaste, a form of fear. I lowered my head and let Hakram set it down on my brow. The cold touch of steel was no burden, but the promise it bore was a different story.

"It is fitting, I think," I murmured, and Hakram's eyes met mine. "That you would be the one to crown me."

His face twitched at that, a flinch only half-swallowed. My gauntleted hand reached for his arm and squeezed him comfortingly.

"I have relied on you for so many things, since you were my sergeant," I said.

"I did what I could," Adjutant replied gruffly.

He looked away, and were he anyone else I would have thought him abashed.

"We made a deal once, under moonlight," I said.

"That was no deal, Catherine," the orc said. "That was an oath and I stand by it. I called you Warlord then, and I don't regret it. I don't keep to the old ways, not like Nauk, but it is no empty word. I haven't used it since because it—"

He scowled, unsure of himself for once.

"It's not the right title, not for the two of us," he finally said. "Too shallow in the wrong places. We are more than war."

It was times like these I understood how peculiar Hakram truly was, compared to others of his kind. It wasn't his temperament, or his way with people. There was an underlying threat to the way orcs like Nauk and Juniper and every other orc I'd met saw the world, and in Adjutant it was absent. I thought much of the Hellhound, but never would I imagine her saying *we are more than war*. It would go against her nature. To my general peace was the wait between campaigns, rule a necessary evil best left to the hands of others. Since he'd come in my service, Hakram had acted in myriad ways: diplomat, steward, tactician and warrior. A confidant, too, and how many times would my temper have led me astray if not for his calming influence? It'd been my Name that gathered the Woe, but it was Adjutant who was keeping them together. That much was becoming undeniable as the weeks passed. It would have been easy to dismiss this as part of his Name, becoming whatever I needed him to be, but Names did not come from nothing. There had to be will behind them, an intent to fill the gaps I left without ever realizing it. There were a great many victories to my name, nowadays, but few of them would have been possible without the tall orc quietly going behind me and doing the labour I never even considered needed to be done.

I wondered if this was what Scribe felt like to Black: a limb whose absence left you a cripple in all the worst of ways. I'd made much of my feelings for Kilian, lately, and the ever-complicated knot that was my relationship with my teacher, but if I had to name the person I loved most in the world it was the orc standing in front of me. Because he'd chosen to trust me when he had nothing to gain, long before a Name came into it. Because he was a decent man and he still believed in what we did – and as long as I had that, that shining truth tucked away in the back of my mind, it did not matter what horrors I hitched my course to. Hakram was perhaps my closest friend in the world, but more than that he was compass. Without him I would be lost in more ways than one.

"Oaths bind both ways," I said. "The part that is mine to uphold, do you judge it upheld?"

He laughed quietly.

"You've always kept your eyes on the horizon," he said. "On the next task, the next enemy, the next war. Look down, Catherine Foundling. See where you are."

In his deep-set eyes there was something feverish, the fire he always kept under lock and key let loose for my sake.

"We're winning," he said. "Just by standing here, we're winning. Because they only rule us only as long as we let them, and the moment that truth bleeds it dies. They can kill every last one of us and it won't matter, because as long as the banner's been raised once someone will rise to carry it again."

Baring fangs, he met my eyes.

"They wouldn't let us have a seat at the table, so we *broke* it," Hakram said, and there was a savage satisfaction to him. "That will not go quietly into the night, no matter what happens today."

"It's going to get worse," I said quietly. "After Diabolist. We know her kind, what it can do: rise tall and fall just as hard. It's the people behind her we need to end, and they've owned the Wasteland since before it had that name."

*"How tall the spears, and great the host,"* he spoke in Kharsum, cadenced and low, *"This empire's bier, of graven ghosts."*

His smile grew sharp, and there was not a thimble of mercy to be found in it.

"They say the last of the Warlords spoke that verse, after the Miezens destroyed the holy grounds of the Broken Antlers," Hakram said. "We were great, in those days, great as any power birthed since."

The Beast stirred under my skin, coiling lazily as it tasted the stench of death in the air – death past, and death yet to come.

"That's the thing with eras, Catherine," Adjutant said, hard-eyed and proud. "They come to an end. So let's bury it together, the two of us – this fucking Age of Wonders they built on our backs."

I clasped the arm he offered, and it felt like an oath.

—

Liesse looked like the gates of some godforsaken hell. The walls of sun-kissed stone had covered in great runes and the pale blocks had withered like fruit on the vine. Atop them stood unmoving thousands facing us, and though this was a fortified city and not a fortress they were tall ramparts and well-built. Behind them the labyrinth of alleys and shops would be crawling with wards and undead: we'd bleed for every street. I'd taken this city once before, fought my way through the Lone Swordsman and his army, but this was a different kind of threat. This was Akua Sahelian, and though I bore her no small hatred I would not deny she was cunning, ruthless and powerful. The Diabolist had called the last of the Truebloods to her side, gathered sorcerers and warlocks and every breed of practitioner the Wasteland could boast. The elements unleashed was the least of what I could expect. There would be devils, and perhaps even demons. She'd gone too far to flinch at the notions of what might come if she failed. What made Akua dangerous beyond all that, though, was displayed before the city.

Thirty thousand undead stood, but not in simple ranks. As I marshalled armies from every corner of Callow, Diabolist had prepared her grounds to receive me. A ditch had been dug and palisade raised behind it, wights with spears massed behind. Three bastions of rough stone had been raised behind, filled with mages and what few siege engines she had. No great fortifications, these, but our own trebuchets and scorpions would be lower on the ground and would have to be brought into range as hers awaited. To the sides of the ditch stakes had been hammered into the ground with broad depths, a clear deterrent for my knights. The nature of my forces was not unknown to her, and she knew that between the two of us it was me who was pressed for time. There'd been talk of assaulting the other walls, since this front was so deeply fortified, but though there would be such an attempt the main thrust would have to be through this direction. It was where the gates were, the weak point in the defensive wards. The fortifications facing Procer were the newest, since that side had once been facing Lake Hengest and had lacked any fortifications, but since then she'd raised walls atop a sharp slope of beaten earth and anchored wards in them. The stretch between those walls and the Ducal Palace had been made into a killing field worthy of Summerholm.

It was the most direct way to the heart of her ritual, but the casualties we'd taken forcing our way through there would be... staggering. That knowledge, about the anchor of her ritual, had come without any need for spying. Above Liesse, Akua Sahelian's madness was laid bare for all of Creation to witness. Pillars of darkness rose from the roof of the palace half a dozen leagues into the sky, where their true nature was revealed: a cage. Like claws the darkness clasped a gargantuan orb of roiling smoke, ever-moving and testing the confine. Only a handful of people on the field knew the true nature of it for sure, though I suspected the Warlock would divine it after a closer look. He'd helped design the containment wards about to be activated around the city, after all. The souls of the Deoraithe cast a heavy shadow on the morning sky, becoming more a stormy dusk the closer one came to the city. Millions upon millions, accumulated since before Praes stood a single nation or the Miezani so much as caught sight of Calernia's shores. It was, I thought, almost as deep a desecration as Akua's casual slaughter of a hundred thousand innocents. Almost.

"Not impressed," Archer volunteered. "Now if she'd set the sky on fire that would be something, but this is just decorative."

"Shut your fucking mouth," Juniper spat. "Lord Black is about to speak, and if I miss a single word because you're whining you'll regret it."

The Fifteenth, for once, would not take the vanguard of the fight. That would be the duty of the veteran legions, with my men

serving as a mobile reserve to be deployed when the city was breached. The field outside was not ours to take. I'd gathered most my people regardless, since the Woe would have duties before it came to the fighting in the streets. Thief was the most glaring absence, come to camp only for a few hours when we'd first arrived and then disappearing into Liesse again. She'd given me priceless information, though, and though she would not be fighting there was one last task ahead of her. Hierophant was clearly bored out of his skull, impatient with anything that did not involve toying with the wards he'd spent several weeks designing, and Archer was even worse. She'd gotten restless the moment she saw the armies arranged, spoiling for a fight. Juniper's general staff stood with her and as usual Hakram was the lone isle of serenity to be had. As for Robber and his cohort, they were my knife in the night. What I had in mind for them did not involve being out in the open.

"Archer, don't assault my general," I said absent-mindedly. "I don't have a spare."

Juniper sneered in my direction, but did not comment. She'd been telling everyone to be silent for a half hour now, long before Black was even close to making an appearance. He was out now, though. Atop his dead horse barded in steel, in bare plate from head to toe and black cloak streaming behind him. He'd offered me the right to make the address, but I'd declined. Speeches had never been my strength – I worked best with small numbers. I would have to learn the skill, eventually, but this was too important a battle for fumbling. Horse passing before the armoured ranks of the Legions, my teacher slowed his mount and came to rest. When he spoke, it was with sorcery behind his voice: there was not a soul in our host that would not hear him.

"We have fought this war before," he said, and his words washed over us like a wave.

There was pause, but not long enough for stillness to set in. I could admire the skill of it – his fame as an orator was not unearned.

"Forty years ago, we fought it from the Steppes to the Hungering Sands," he said. "Twenty years before that it was fought as well, and again and again all the way back to the days of the Declaration. A thousand battles spanning a thousand years."

The Black Knight's power filled the air like a haze, and even where I stood I could feel it whispering to me.

"*Legionaries*," he called, a bone-deep shiver giving answer. "Look atop those walls and know you face a millennium of blood and arrogance staring down at you. You know that banner. Your fathers and mothers fought under it, against it. Under that standard Callow was bled a hundred times. Under that standard, Praes tore

itself apart at the whims of the mad and the vicious. Are you not tired? I am."

He laughed, a thing of dark and bitter anger.

"I have fought this war since I was a boy," he said. "And so have you, in every shop and field and pit there is to be found in this empire. There is no peace with this foe, only struggle from dawn to dusk."

His voice rose.

"Legionaries," he called. "You of Praes and Callow, of Steppes and Eyries, you have fought this war before and *won it*. Forty years ago, we broke the spine of the High Lords. Yet here they stand before us, fangs bared. Will you let this challenge go unanswered?"

It was the orcs that begun. Feet stamped the ground, swords were hammered against shields. It came and went like a summer storm, deafening in sudden fury and sudden absence.

"I will not tell you our cause is just, for justice does not win wars," he said. "I will not tell you victory is deserved or assured, for Creation owes nothing. If the world refuses you your due, then *declare war upon all the world*."

His sword cleared the scabbard, the sound of sharpness and steel a call to war.

"On this field, on this day, two truths rule," he said. "There is only one sin."

"DEFEAT," sixty thousand voices screamed back.

"There is only one grace."

"VICTORY."

Shields rose, swords unsheathed, horns sounded and with that last word filling the air the Second Battle of Liesse began.

## **Villainous Interlude: Crescendo**

*"Then let us be wicked,  
Let us be reddest ruin  
Rent, broken, crooked  
Black hearted and cruel*

*Then let us be doom,  
To both friend and foe  
Fly banner of gloom  
We lowest of the low*



*Rise, rise all ye villains  
You rogues and madmen  
Proudly claim the stage,  
Of this wondrous age*

*We are not kind or just  
Deserving of any victory  
We are a thing of dust  
Promised only misery*

*So smile, Tyrants,  
And let us be wicked"*

– Final monologue of "The Many Deaths of Traitorous", a play on the reign of the Dread Emperor Traitorous

In the depths of the city of Liesse, beyond layers upon layers of wards and traps, there was a room. For more than a year it had been slowly crafted to perfection, and for years before that had Akua Sahelian spent days and nights refining its design. Removing impurities and inefficiencies, balancing ease of use and breadth of effect so that only a single soul in all of Creation could use it as it was meant to be used. Should she live for a hundred thousand years she would never make anything half so great, for it was the culmination of everything that she was. All that she loved and hated, all that had made and fought her. There had been a child, once, who looked upon pyramids of mud and blood and felt awe. At the skill, at the scope, at the *power* that still dwelled within – and though Tasia Sahelian had toiled greatly to make a hollow husk of that girl, a mere receptacle for her ambitions, that spark of wonder had never been snuffed out. It had grown into flame, and that sacred burn coursed through her veins today. And it whispered of *triumph*.

Diabolist felt the city pulse like a living creature, arrays of sorcery spread across it like arteries all leading back to the heart that was her. In this moment, she knew, she was half a god. How easy it would have been to grow drunk on that might, had she been of a lesser line. But she was a Sahelian, the blood of the original murder. The killers of the first empress, who'd writ the truth of Praes in blood and treachery. Her forbears had been kings and queens, and Tyrants more than once. Rule, the ownership of power however fleeting it may be, was nothing less than her birth right. Walls of carved stone around her were as a pond, and on those reflective facades she saw the Legions of Terror standing with a man before them. The Black Knight, she thought, spoke well. Yet it was wrong, for him to be the speaker. It should have been Catherine Foundling, her match and mirror. Her red right hand in the making. Once she had thought too little of the Squire, believed her to be nothing more than tool and obstacle, but how she had learned since. Fasili had once remarked

it was a shame Foundling was not born Praesi, for she had the seeds of greatness in her, but Akua knew better.

It had to be this way. It was the fire, the righteous indignation that made Squire who she was – a burn no lesser than Diabolist's own. If she'd never been crushed underfoot, she would never have risen from it fangs bared. The Soninke closed her eyes and smiled. She could glimpse the ending of their story already, grasp the edges of its shape with her fingers. Akua would break Catherine Foundling, shatter her beyond repair, and the creature of jagged edges and hatred that remained after would kneel at her feet. And what a fearsome monster she would be, upon emerging from that crucible. She would sweep through Diabolist's foes with fire and sword, a woe on all she faced worthy of the name bestowed upon her. It made Akua shiver in pleasure just to think of it. The Diabolist opened her eyes and let the words of the Carrion Lord burrow into her ears. The only distraction was her father's shuffling at her side, for there was only one seat in this room and it would not tolerate the sitting of any but her.

"He's not wrong, Mpanzi," Dumisai of Aksum said. "They say nowadays that the legions won that civil war, the orcs and the goblins, but I remember it still. The Calamities owned it body and soul: it defined them as much as their Names. Better not to fight them at all."

Spoken, she thought, as a man who could have been the Warlock but chose obscurity over the uncertainty of struggle. The odds, she knew, would not have been in her father's favour. The Sovereign of the Red Skies had begun to earn his title when he was still the Apprentice, and though claimants gained powers when embracing their claim Lord Wekesa would have had the full might of his old Name behind him. Yet it was never a certainty, that an Apprentice would become the Warlock. Praesi Names were never easily won. Akua loved her father, but she would not deny that in the face of offered greatness he had flinched.

"I do not hate them," Diabolist said. "Nor the Empress. For all their flaws, they sought to make our people rise. I am not Mother, Papa – I do not despise what they are. It is a mistake made in good faith, and killing them was never the point of this. I am *surpassing* them. If that must involve taking their lives, then so be it."

And how long had she dreamed of this, of escaping the shackles? The Carrion Lord had been right, in part. They could not win the war by repeating the same defeat with a hundred different fresh faces. But the pair that ruled Praes had abandoned everything that the peoples of the Wasteland were to avoid another disgrace, and that was a betrayal greater than mere failure. They could win and still be Praesi, Akua knew. *Go to your grave gladly, Black Knight, having learned the truth of that – you were, for all your*

*weaknesses, a patriot.* She would not deny the fearsome depth of that loyalty, however twisted it was. The man's words ended in the tired adage of the Legions, screamed back by the soldiers, and Diabolist rose to her feet.

"Go," she told her father. "And stay safe. You are worth more to me than petty victories."

His arms wrapped around her and for a heartbeat she was a child again, his chin nestled atop her head.

"Live," he whispered. "Whatever the cost, whatever the consequences. Live. Nothing else matters."

"Believe in me," she asked.

"'til my last breath and beyond," he promised.

No empty words, coming from a sorcerer who knew the mysteries he did. He left after that, the passing warmth of him lingering behind. Diabolist stood before the rune-inscribed walls and laid a single finger on them. They lit up like a starry sky, reaching for a hundred different arrays spread across houses and bastions and pits. The Carrion Lord had spoken for the ruling order, for the woman who held the Tower. She would speak, then, for the Wasteland. For the Empire that was and would be, for the greatness that was not yet forgot. Akua Sahelia stood proud, for there was more to her than mere ambition.

"We are," she said quietly, "the last of the Praesi."

They would hear her, her words carried by sorcery worn and ancient. They would hear her and know they might be wicked but they were not wrong.

"The Tower," Akua said, "is in the hands of a woman who would rule us forever. Before us stand her legions of dupes, led by her most loyal hound. You heard them speak of dues, and so know they deny the oldest truth of our empire: *there are no equals.*"

It was like drinking spring water, to speak words she truly meant instead of whatever must be said to gain. Relief, that after years of scuttling in the dark she could raise her true banner.

"There are the rulers and the ruled," she said. "The greater and the lesser. To deny this is to deny the Gods themselves, for that is how they made us. And now our Empress bows and scrapes to a conquered people, ignoring the reality that saw them conquered."

She let silence ring loudly.

"Power," she hissed.

There were others in foreign lands that would call this ugly truth, but she spoke to Praesi: the people of altars and pacts, of naked ruthless ambition. What she offered them now was the song of their ancestors, sung anew with fresh promise.

"Twenty years ago, we were more powerful than the people of Callow," she continued. "Twenty years ago we were *better* than them, for beyond all the lies and stories that is the bare truth of Creation: the powerful own the world."

A laugh escaped her lips, sharply mocking.

"They call themselves a different breed, these hypocrites, but what is arrayed before you? Mere force of arms."

And her people knew steel, that old friend of ambition. How many of their ancestors had claimed the Tower wielding it?

"In the end, all they are is another movement in the Great Game. The enemy might be powerful, but that should bring you no fear."

She leaned forward, hard-eyed.

"Iron sharpens iron, and when we emerge victorious we will be so sharp a blade as to make the world tremble."

Akua smiled, a display that should have been beneath her but at this last pivot of her life was not.

"Glory in this day, sons and daughters of Praes," she said. "The Age of Wonders is upon you, and though it is great and terrible to behold, let Creation remember this – *so are we*."

And in the wake of her words, as the Legions advanced and flanking forces sallied, sorcery bloomed. No wild cheers, from the people of the Wasteland. Acclaim came in the form of death unleashed. A thousand mages stirred to action, and when they struck it was with the wrath of a people cheated their destiny. How long had it been, since Calernia last saw the finest of Praes moved to war? Too long. With every streak of lightning and storm of flame that balance was redressed, and in the face of steel a rolling wave of power was sent forth. It would have swept the legionaries aside like kindling, had it touched them.

It did not, because the Sovereign of the Red Skies had taken the field.

High above a star was born, and it came into the world with a keening cry. It pulled the sorcery like a withdrawing tide, swept it upwards until it was filled and a ring of raging sorcery detonated across the sky with a sound like thunder. The mage lines of the Legions, these half-mages minted and spent like cheap copper, gave answer. A dozen rituals burned and massive

lances of flame were sent at Akua's bastions, but what did she care? These were but pale imitations, and the original stood arrayed against them. Half the lances dispersed within a heartbeat of being thrown, the formulas torn apart like the half-baked jokes they were, and the rest were turned against their own side. The fires changed from lances to beasts, lions and snakes and tigers, and with dull roars they attacked the advancing legionaries. Dozens died incinerated within moments, before the Carrion Lord lent the weight of his aspects to the men and led them through the inferno. *Lead*, Akua thought. *Conquer*. Not tools for the killing of heroes but for the leading of armies, and as the Black Knight's mantled came upon them the legionaries became *more*. Swifter, stronger, indifferent to the raging flames.

The Diabolist did not strike as the Sixth Legion followed the Carrion Lord in his sweeping advance, turning her eyes to the sky instead. There a single silhouette rode a winged steed stolen from Arcadia, cloak of many colours streaming behind her. An artefact in the making, gathering weight with every fallen army stitched onto the rest. Already Akua suspected sorcery would slide over like water off a duck's back, and it was still nascent to its true form. Squire would strike at the heart of the enemy, for that was her nature. Not through aspects, it was too early for that, but Catherine Foundling had another signature. The winged steed passed over the ranks of dead manning the entrenched palisades, deftly avoiding spellfire from the bastions as a simple knife cut down what appeared to be sacks tied to the sides of the mount. When the first arrow took flight from impossibly far, flames coating it, Diabolist almost laughed. There it was. One, two, three – eight in whole. Every single sack of goblinfire was ignited while still dropping, and fell like green rain over the wights. Some reached the bastions filled with mages and engines, but there were panes of force awaiting. The goblinfire burned into them, but they were thrown aside and her sorcerers left untouched. Her general's careful experimentation with the most dangerous tools of the Legions had paid fruit.

Diabolist returned to her seat, settling against the wooden frame as her eyes remained fixed on the unfolding battle. Soon. She would have preferred to let the Legions overcommit, but the Warlock would soon go on the offensive and he was not to be taken lightly. The Fifteenth, she saw, was not part of the assault. A reserve, likely kept for when the walls were breached. It would serve other purpose, but Akua was not displeased. They would be tied up regardless, removed from the equation. That was how her enemies would lose, in the end. Dispersed to deal with half a dozen threats, they would fall one by one. The Sixth Legion reached the outer field of traps, and Akua's mages triggered their arrays. Within three heartbeats what had been an empty field was filled with howling lesser devils.

And then they died.

Diabolist froze, blood going cold. Every single devil summoned by the arrays had turned into red dust before so much as striking a blow. The Warlock's doing, it could only be him, but how had he known? He'd have needed to begin casting before the triggers, which meant... *Someone has studied the lay of our defences*, she realized. And done so with a great deal of precision. Akua's fingers tightened around the arms of her chair. It might be assumed that the devils in the secondary arrays would meet the same fate, and without them serving as a slowing mechanism for the advance of the Legions then soon her palisades would be under assault. And with the goblinfire already thinning the ranks of the dead, they would break. Now. It had to be now.

The Diabolist breathed out and her mind stilled. It'd been seven years now, since she had separated her soul from her earthly flesh. It had spared her ugly end in this very city, once, and from that it was likely her foes had come to assume it was a measure meant for her preservation. To ensure that even if her body was destroyed, she could invest another and continue her plans. As it happened, that had merely been a fortunate consequence. Akua had removed her soul in preparation for something... greater. In the depths of the Ducal Palace, where the anchor of her great working awaited, a small cylinder of pure obsidian covered in runes lit up. Inside it was bound her soul, but it was no mere phylactery. It was a key. Her soul touched the untold millions of dead Deoraithe she had caged, connecting to the greater weave. All over Liesse runes burned bright, the glare alone melting stone and shattering wood around them as the greatest ritual Praes had seen since the days of Triumphant began.

Runic letters formed in front of her, a contract written, and then she gave the sorcery shape.

On the plains to the flank of the encroaching legions, a dot of yellow flame formed. In it the contract she had written shone, and the flame grew. An empty circle was forged, the diameter half a mile wide, and the yellow flame solidified. Creation *screamed*, screamed in protest as it was ripped apart forcefully and the Hellgate opened. Not a Lesser Breach, but a Greater. The first since the fall of Keter, and unlike the Dead King she would not be forbidden a second. The souls of the Deoraithe were not spent, merely thinned, and would coalesce again in a matter of days. It would take her even longer to stabilize her own, but the true terror of her work was the scale. Distance meant nothing, to sufficient power. She could open a gate in the heartlands of the Principate without moving, if she so wished. Akua Sahelian's army was the entirety of all the Hells, and as the first devil crossed her gate, the binding she had written in the flame leashing it to her will, she laughed. The host at her disposal was without end, and she had crafted this ritual so it could only ever answer to

her. The array was part of her, as much as any limb or drop of blood.

Waves of wasted power coursed into the escapements she had designed so very carefully, empowering wards that would have taken hundreds of mages to use and just like that Liesse... disappeared. Forced half a step out of Creation. There had been a reason that she had chosen the southern city out of all the governorships she could have secured. The corpse of the angel, though left behind, had ensured that Liesse was always slightly askew from Creation. Easier to move, and given clear boundary by the ancient wards surrounding it. And so now the city was out of reach, save for one entrance she had crafted herself. It lay at the heart of her fortifications on the plains, and the enemy would bleed themselves dry trying to take it. All that planning from the clever generals on the other side yet here they stood now, the forces meant to assault the walls on the sides utterly useless and the exposed flank of the army facing endless onslaught.

Hell began pouring out of the Breach, and the Diabolist smiled the smile of a woman who was going to conquer the world.

## Chapter 60: Opening

*"Victory is transient. To seek it is to remain so. I have seen the face of that which is eternal, and it stands beyond struggle."*

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Flight was markedly less exhilarating when people kept trying to kill me during, I decided as I guided Zombie the Third into a sharp dive to avoid a bolt of black lightning. Half a league up in the sky, the wind howling around me, I watched disaster unfold on the field below. The order of battle agreed upon had been fairly simple: the first wave would be the Legions. The Fifth, the Sixth and Twelfth would strike the initial blow, as the Fourth and the Ninth moved to the sides of Liesse bolstered by Callowan levies. The Deoraithe bowmen would move behind the centre, followed by the men-at-arms, and the Fifteenth would remain as a reserve. I was to soften up the enemy fortifications with Archer's help and a goblinfire trick, and until the aftermath of the green rain everything had been going to plan.

Then Akua had opened a fucking Hellgate and Liesse had just... disappeared. Gone into thin air.

She'd chosen the place for the gate perfectly, I had to admit. Behind the Fourth's advance, though the gated was oriented towards the Deoraithe second line. There were only a few devils coming out of the woodworks right now, but if that trickle turned into a flood our armies were going to break. The Fourth would be

cut off and overwhelmed, the back of our centre up to its neck in hellspawn from behind and fortified casters from the front. The entire host would be splintered, and of the only two forces still in play – the Fifteenth under Juniper and Ninth with half the levies – the Ninth was positioned on the opposite side of the field where it needed to be. With out entire centre in the way. In the span of a single heartbeat, Akua had fucked both our left flank and centre while making our right wing useless. I would have admired that a little, if I wasn't too busy being furious. Zombie responded to my spurs as a living beast would, though I could still command its undead flesh regardless of its own will, and we arced down gracefully.

The staff officers of the Fifteenth parted for me in haste and I reined in the winged horse before someone could get trampled. Juniper, leaning over a table, ignored my entrance. Her brows were creased in thought. I cleared my throat.

"I heard you coming, Foundling," she said. "Now shut up. I'm thinking."

Yeah, that was about par for the course. I sighed and dismounted, Hakram appearing just in in time to be handed the reins. Hierophant and Archer were still out of sight, but I could feel them approaching. No, *feel* was perhaps the wrong term. It was an instinct, like the the one that warned me of danger, whispering that they were coming close. Whatever we'd done in Dormer, when all of us save Thief had fought as one, it had left a mark. The implications of that worried me.

"The Carrion Lord's advance has not slowed," Adjutant said.

"I saw," I grunted back.

There was danger in that, though I knew better than to assume Black wasn't aware of it. With the legionaries he had under the mantle of his Name advancing so much more swiftly, what had once been a wave was turning into a sloppy wedge. If he got too far ahead... He wouldn't, I told myself. Black had been winning battles before I was even a look in my mother's eyes.

"Senior Mage, report," Juniper growled.

I almost jumped. I hadn't noticed Kilian was there at all. Red hair free, she'd had her eyes closed and a loose chord of interlocked runes clutched between her fingers. After a moment she flinched in pain and opened her eyes.

"The Hellgate is beyond my ability to understand," she announced. "As for Liesse, I have some notion. The city is not gone, merely phased a step out of Creation. There is still a point of access to it."



The Hellhound made room at the table, hairless brow raised.

"Here," Kilian said, pointing down at the map.

I leaned over to see and winced. That was behind the palisade and trench, in open space overlooked by all three bastions and currently filled with wights. This one was on us, I thought. We'd all been so convinced the field fortifications were a battle measure none of us had taken the time to inspect them for anything like this. Not when we'd barely scratched the surface of understanding the kind of wards covering the walls. Juniper did not reply, brow creasing deeper. Archer and Hierophant passed the ring of legionaries exactly when I knew they would, the brown-skinned woman the only one smiling of the two.

"Masego," I called out. "I need an opinion."

"My preliminary analysis is over," he replied. "This is a Greater Breach, Catherine."

Kilian sucked in a sharp breath, but everyone else seemed as confused as I was. I assumed bad. Very bad, even. Usually the best bet to make when it came to Diabolist.

"A stable Hellgate," Hierophant added when he noticed the lack of understanding.

He sounded a touch irritated. I sucked my lip. If this had just been a play to pull out reinforcements like Akua had done at Liesse, the gate would have eventually closed on its own even if we didn't manage to shut it first. A major danger, but something that could be handled. This was different. There was a hole in the fabric of Creation in the middle of Callow and on the other side was a literally endless horde that wanted to devour everything in existence. At least I assumed. I didn't know much about the lay of the Realms Below or the beings that dwelled inside, but I doubted Diabolist had reached for Hell that was all about weaving straw baskets.

"Withdrawal is not feasible," Juniper said, calm tone cutting through the silence that had followed Masego's words. "The god bound above the Palace is not gone, and regardless time plays in her her favour more than ours."

"Hierophant, can you close this?" I asked.

He snorted, then realized I'd been serious.

"Catherine, a Greater Breach cannot be closed by definition. It is a permanent bridge between layers of existence," he said.

I grimaced.

"Can you just pop a cork in the hole, then?" I pressed.

"Theoretically," he agreed. "It would be temporary, however. And require power superior to that employed in the original breaching."

"He means no," Archer cheerfully said.

I kind of wanted to hit her in the face for that.

"If we shut down her ritual, does the gate close?" I pressed.

"You do not seem to grasp the principles involved," Hierophant said flatly. "The ritual is done. The gate is there. The Breach was made. There is no *unmaking* this."

I turned my eyes to Kilian, who raised up her palms in surrender.

"Diabolism is not a field of study covered in the College," she said. "I know nothing of this."

"Juniper?" I tried, grasping at straws.

The orc's hands left the table and she folded them behind her back.

"If we do not contain the Hellgate within a half-hour, the battle is lost," she said. "And so will be all of Callow west of Summerholm and south of Daoine, within amonth."

The weight of that announcement rang like a bell. How many people was that? Most major cities fell within those borders. Vale, Southpool, Laure, Denier and even Ankou. I couldn't quite remember the exact numbers from the last Imperial census at the moment, but Laure alone was almost half a million souls. I spat to the side.

"Then get your blades out, people," I said. "We're going for a walk."

Whatever answer I might have gotten to that was drowned out by the sound of neighing and crackling flame, followed by the pungent smell of brimstone. The chariot landed with a crash, pulled by two pitch-black winged horses, and in it stood a man decked entirely in scarlet: the Sovereign of Red Skies, dressed in his full glory of war.

"Belay that," he said, and there was nothing lazy or amused in his voice.

That had me even warier. He was not a man to take the situation seriously unless he had to, in my experience. With a flourish of the wrist the Warlock produced a small flat stone and tossed it at me. I caught it without missing a beat, raising an eyebrow.

"Into your mouth, Squire," he said. "Welcome to the Link."

My eyes flicked to Masego, who nodded absent-mindedly. Safe enough, then. Gingerly I put the stone in my mouth and shuddered in discomfort when I felt it move on its own, fusing with the flesh beneath my lower teeth. A heartbeat later sorcery gently flared and I heard the sound of flesh being run through directly in my ears.

"Catherine," Black said. "Good."

"Black," I murmured. "We're in deep shit."

"Perhaps less than it seems," he replied, and on the other side something screamed and died. "You are to join me on the front along with Adjutant and Archer. The bastions must fall, and quickly."

"The Hellgate?" I asked.

"Wekesa has a theory," Black replied.

"That leaves Masego free," I frowned.

"He's going to-"

My teacher was interrupted by a sound I'd heard once before. A faint scream, rising higher and higher in pitch. Then another. Then another. Oh Gods. Had she really? Even for Akua this was playing with fire. The 'Link' cut out, before I heard Warlock grunt and sound returned as suddenly as it had gone.

"Hurry," Black ordered. "The Fifteenth is to accompany Wekesa against the Hellgate. Overall command is ceded to Marshal Ranker as of now."

Silence returned to my ears and I turned to face my officers. Several of them had gone pale, hands shaking.

"Demons," I said.

"It was a given they would be used here," Warlock said conversationally. "Not even Sahelians are so mad as to call on the Unmakers within a closed realm. Masego, you are to contain them."

Hierophant's glass eyes did not move under the cloth, but I could feel his attention move across the field and find the unfolding catastrophes.

"Madness," the dark-skinned mage said. "Apathy. And..."

He hesitated.

"Order," the Warlock finished. "That one seems to be the oldest. It might be Shango's Doom itself, the contract is still

unaccounted for. Begin with Madness nonetheless, before we lose half our men to the spread. They devour grounds unlike any other breed."

Hierophant nodded, not bothering to reply, and strode ahead without paying attention to any of us. So much for planning together. I forced myself to focus even as in the back of my head threefold song began to be sung. How much worse, I thought, did it have to be close to them? Unless my sight betrayed me, the rebels had brought forth the madness right in front of the centre of their outer palisade.

"General Juniper," I said. "We have our orders."

The orc's eyes flicked to the most powerful mage in the Empire.

"We are meant to escort you," she deduce. "Am I to take this as meaning the Hellgate may be closed?"

The Warlock smiled.

"Oh, that clever child's work is not so easily undone," the man said. "The gate will remain. Destruction, though, is the tool of the uncreative. I have other means."

That cleared up very little. Was is something that came with the magic, the urge to be a mysterious jackass? The dark-skinned man rolled his shoulder to limber it and cast a wary eye to the looming Hellgate in the distance.

"Well, no time dawdle," he sighed. "General, I will need your men to establish a solid beachhead on the other side of the gate. Do be quick about it. I'll limit the spill until you arrive on the scene."

The reins came down like a lash and the winged horses neighed, the very sound unnatural. Within moments he was tearing through the sky again. My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"Juniper," I said, turning to meet my general's gaze. "Can you do it?"

There was a heartbeat of silence, then the Hellhound chuckled and her lips split into a grin that was nasty little piece of work.

"I am," she said calmly, "a general of the Legions of Terror, anointed and sworn under sacred standard. If a Hell wages war upon the Empire, then I will invade that Hell."

Her voice did not rise, or her intonation shift. It was, as she said, as simple statement of fact. There was something in her eyes when she spoke that wasn't quite a Name – she did not have the weight behind her for that, likely never would – but was just as fearsome in its own way. It was cold, absolute and merciless

certainty. The stare of a woman who had killed the enemy a hundred times in her mind already, and knew all that remained was acting out the movements. The tremors left the limbs of her officers, straight-backed pride flowing to fill the gap. Named did not have a monopoly on greatness, I thought. Sometimes all that was needed was the unshakeable will of one who never even considered defeat a possibility.

"Then hear my order, General," I said, and my mantle stirred at the shape of this. "Even if it is impossible, even if all that rules Above and Below stands arrayed against you – *win*. I will allow nothing less from you."

"Warlord," she said, chops bared and head bowed.

I left it at that, because between the two of us nothing more needed to be said. There might be a day where Juniper failed in the face of ruin, because in the end did we not all fail? No matter how clever or powerful, an ending always came. But, I thought, it would not be today. Not against this. Adjutant stood at my side, loosening the leather ring holding his axe, and I found Archer staring at me with a pleased smile.

"Zeze's playing with the hellspawn and Fury Green's got her own battle to win," Archer drawled. "So what do you have for us, Cat?"

My eyes found the distant silhouettes of the bastions, flickering with sorcery and siege engines.

"String your bow, Archer," I said. "The three of us are taking down the strongholds with Black."

Had the day not been so dire, I might have been unsettled by how feral the grin I got in response was. Today, though? I was counting on it.

—

Zombie the Third got us near the front, but that was all I would ask of it. Three people were too much to have any room to manoeuvre, and twice we were nearly torched on our flight forward. We made a slow, fat target for any mage with a little juice to send out. I sent back the undead horse behind the lines and took a deep breath. *Shit, steel and blood*. The scent of battlefields. I'd landed us close to General Orim's Fifth Legion, which currently made up the left side of assault. He trailed behind Black still, even though my teacher had abandoned the centre for the right, but he'd caught up some since I'd last had a look. Black had run into some heavy resistance at the palisade, and had yet to pierce through the enemy centre. That wasn't the part of this battlefield that worried me.

Hierophant's lid on the demons unleashed was paper-thin, it was obvious to see. Not only had he been ordered to maintain three sets of wards against demons simultaneously, but he was facing constant pressure by the mages in the bastions trying to undo his work. It was worthy of a little awe, I thought, how he was still managing to keep his head slightly above the water for all that. I could not even see the demons, save for the occasional heartbeat-lasting glance, since they were surrounded by smooth globes of ivory-like solid sorcery. Around those wards sticks of incense floated, slowly burning out only to be engulfed in ivory flames at the last moment and from ashes born anew and full. The strength of the wards? It made sense. I'd seen some sticks burn much more quickly when the ovals came under fire. Regardless, those few moments where the demons were not completely contained were enough to twist their immediate surroundings. I saw legionaries but also wights, things that should have no soul of their own, begin howling and tear at themselves and everything close to them. Others simply... ceased. Fell down, dead for their hearts no longer beat.

The creepiest was the work of the third. What it touched of Creation became... *unwoven*, in some fundamental way. Air was breathed, but gave no breath. Flesh remained fixed even as men moved, sliding off like oil. Ground became like the sea, and I even caught sight of a man who took a ball of flame to the face rise and walk back, flesh mending, only to advance as he first had and be struck by the very same spell. It was not that the demons ran amok. If they did, the Legions would have broken already. But just by being contained in front of the first palisade protecting the bastions, they created a rampart of death that could not be passed. The legionaries had to go around them, and not come too close, which took them straight into the enemy fire. Tough the goblinfire still burned and had thinned the ranks some, the wights were still thousands and bitterly contested the palisades. Most of the killing, though, came from the bastions. Sorcery lashed out in never-ending waves, trebuchets and scorpions that were the deadly work of goblin engineering carving bloody streaks in the advancing men. Already at least a thousand dead carpeted the field, and dozens more died every heartbeat.

I breathed out and unsheathed my sword, gathering power. Archer idly nocked an arrow and Adjutan's grip tightened against the shaft of his axe with a crisp leathery sound.

"All right," I said. "Let's get this started."

## Chapter 61: Tempo

*"It is true, Chancellor, that a house divided cannot stand. Why do you think mine is the only one I left standing?"*

– Dread Emperor Callous

Legionaries were dying like flies. I'd never seen infantry assault a dug-in position held by mages and engines before, and now that I had I could only say it was ugly work. The enemy had been trained in counter-siege tactics, that much was obvious. The first killing grounds were the trench, deep and wide and filled with stakes at the bottom. The men of the Fifth set down planks to bridge it, but planks were mere wood and wood was no match for the sorcery being flung at it. The bridges rarely lasted longer than twenty heartbeats, forcing the legionaries to come at the palisade in clumps instead of a single overwhelming wave. The palisade itself was nothing special – tall and well-built, but lacking wards or anything arcane – but behind it stood an awaiting sea of wights. Goblin munitions made half a dozen breaches along the length of the fortification, but the legionaries were failing repeatedly to push back the undead behind the openings. This, I thought, would be where we began.

Men scattered around the three of us, as much because they knew what we could do as because of some animalistic instinct that screamed *Named, move aside while you still can*. I could have leapt the trench easily enough, but that would be defeating the purpose. My sword arced along the ground and thick, dark ice formed in a bridge large enough for ranks of ten to pass. Retaliation was immediate. The fluid, silvery spell that flowed towards my chest I cleaved through without missing a beat and felt the sorcery coming apart at the seams. The five scorpion bolts were a touch more difficult to deal with. My Name pulsed and I let the world slow around me, Winter coursing through my veins. The first bolt froze and shattered with but a twist of will and the two behind it followed suit effortlessly, but the trajectory of the other two was angled too far. Clucking my tongue I ducked under the shots, but the sound of screaming and flesh being pierced behind me told me the men of the Fifth had not been so quick on their feet.

They were not the first legionaries to die today, nor would they be the last.

"Archer," I said. "Silence those engines. Leftmost bastion."

The arrow she nocked was more javelin than anything else, not even fletched – given the ridiculous size of her bow, though, it still fit. Golden stripes ran down the side of the wood, glinting with something like power. Not a spell, I thought, but power inherent. That was much more dangerous.

"Cover your ears, my darlings," she drawled.

Thunder sounded with the loosened string. The javelin roiled with lightning before it was even released, and it flew in a crisp trajectory. Panes of power lit up above the bastion's ramparts like fireworks in shades of blue but the arrow sailed right through them. Lightning tore through a scorpion's wooden frame,

shattering it like it'd been swatted by some irritated titan. I didn't know how many of those fancy arrows she had, but I'd leave her to it. This alone had been enough to panic the mages in the bastion, though I knew better than to think it would last.

"Adjutant," I said, idly spinning my blade to limber my wrist. "Let's make the Fifth a beachhead."

I heard Archer cackle behind me as I strode across the ice bridge, followed by the sound of spells tearing into the ground where she'd previously stood. Hakram and I advanced shields raised and found nothing but palisade ahead – the legionaries pouring in behind us were already making for the sides where breaches had been made instead of remaining here.

"Hold," I barked.

Just wood, I thought, and almost snorted. There'd been a time where that would have been enough to slow me down, but I'd left that behind me years ago. My shield whipped into the palisade and there was a loud splintering sound. I'd felt the braces on the other side shake and so I struck again. Again, again, five times in whole before the entire section collapsed ahead of me. There was a heartbeat where the palisade fell back and that was all within my sight, but then the wights raged forward and the fight began. In the distance thunder struck again, Archer's laugh like the ring of doom, and then I rammed into the enemy ranks. There was no place for elegance or subtlety, here. It was just a slog through mud, blood and steel. The kind of graceless fight that had first seen me rise, back in Laure and the Pit. It was almost like coming home and there was a beat to it, a song of crushed skulls and scattered men, and as I sunk deep within myself I embraced it. Adjutant's blurring axe was another of my limbs, moving in accord to a will that was not entirely my own but still mine to shape.

The howling corpses of my people came for my head and they were swept aside. My shield smacked a wight into a spreading pool of green fire as my body pivoted to turn a sword-blow into a wasted swing, Hakram's axe tearing straight through the neck of the undead who'd swung it. Like a whirlwind we advanced, and the hordes of the dead were no match for two Named at the peak of their transient power. The Fifth Legion followed behind, rows of red shields streaked with mud, and what ground we gained was not given back. It wasn't enough, I thought. I went deeper, let the beat guide my hands and feet. Swifter, sharper, until they were just wheat before the sickle. The cold part of my mind knew this was dangerous, remaining in this place where all that existed in Creation was blades in motion, but victory did not come to those who hesitated. What ended it was the song, because it had refrain to it I'd not first heard. Threefold it crooned, feeding me whispers of destruction unending, and when I realized where it



came from my blood ran cold. I tore myself out of the trance, limbs trembling, and prayed to any deity listening that it had not been too late.

"Hakram," I croaked, "stop. *Now*. The demons..."

He let out a hiss that reeked of fear.

"Hierophant should be containing them," he said.

"Can you really contain something like that?" I muttered.

The thing that had been coursing through our veins was gone, and though we still stood strong before the tide our advanced had stopped cold. I didn't want to use an aspect, not out here before I'd even caught glimpse of Akua and the reckoning that lay between us, but the Fifth alone would not be enough to break through the wights. Thunder struck again, Archer a weapon in my arsenal not even the Praesi had answer for. The stone in my mouth warmed with sorcery, and Black's voice cut through the racket of battle.

"Squire," he said. "Leave the Fifth on its own. Move on the left bastion. I need you to draw fire if you can."

My eyes flicked to the right flank, and I finally noticed I had not been the only one to punch through the palisade. Black was on foot now, leading the Fourth's heavies, and where he went death followed. Tendrils of shadow punctured the ground with impossible precision, triggering one array of defensive wards after another while tight ranks of shields drove back the dead. Before long he would be at the foot of the bastion, though the only way up for the legionaries would be the ramp descending from the back of it. It was no mystery why he'd asked me to draw fire: the mages from the two closest bastions were filling the air with sorcery, and though the legionaries under his mantle were not so easily killed the spells still tore smoking holes in his formation every few moments. Casualties were mounting, faster than he could afford.

"Understood," I said. "The demons are proving an issue, Black."

"Purge protocols will be put in place after the battle," he simply replied, and the sound cut.

Joy. That was going to be a glorious aftermath, herding together men who'd fought for us through literal Hells and torching anyone even remotely contaminated. Still, if the alternative was letting soldiers touched by demons back into the wild... There was no winning when it came to dealing with demons, only limiting the damage as much as possible.

"Hakram," I said. "Go back for Archer. We're hitting the left bastion in full force. Tell her... tell I don't care how she gets there, as long as it's fast."

I was going to regret that, I suspected. The orc nodded.

"And you?" he asked.

"I'm going to remind Akua's minions why she keeps running when we fight," I grimly said.

Slogging through the wights barring the path to the bastion would take too long, I decided. But I had option. A platform of ice and shadow formed before me and I leapt atop it, beginning my trek to the enemy.

—

There was a very important difference, I mused, between fighting one angry demigod in the sky and fighting a hundred mortal mages at range. The mages didn't hit nearly as hard, sure, but they hit a *lot*. That was proving to be something of a problem, given how gravity kept being a bit insistent about the whole falling thing. The orb of spinning black light hit me in the chest and knocked me straight off the platform — I smashed my shield into it but the steel began to boil, so instead I let myself drop half a dozen feet before making another platform. Under me the sea of wights grasped upwards, some clever enough to begin piling up to reach me. Right, upper grade undead. Fucking Praesi and their endless magical bullshit parade of horrors. My shield was dripping liquid steel but I froze it back into a semblance of usefulness, part of my mind already forming another platform as I did. I'd learned pretty early on that picking up the pace was the most important part of this game.

I was halfway there, but this close they were having an easier time pushing me back. I could see their faces from here, behind the glowing panes, and there was as much terror to behold as there was sneering. The way I kept stubbornly not dying was probably the reason for the former. Two leaps before I got my shoulder clipped again, and that had me slipping long enough for a lash of lightning to crack down at my head. I hurriedly hid under my cloak and the sorcery washed past, but then the fuckers shattered the platform under me and I dropped down onto the wights. I landed on one's head and even as a hundred hands and blades went for me I coiled my legs and jumped back up. The pane of ice I made at an angle, immediately leaping off it and ending up already in flight when the mage volley came calling. *Steady, Catherine*, I told myself. *Steady and careful is how we get there*. I faked a forming platform to the right then veered to the left on another, lips quirking at how eagerly they fell for it.

I heard a hoarse yell, and my brow rose as I saw a trebuchet stone hit the wights ahead. The Legions had finally set up their engines in range, looked like. Then a silhouette rose slowly from atop the stone, resetting a broken arm with a scream, and Adjutant tossed his crumpled up shield at a wight's head. Had he just... That had *worked*? I knew he was tougher now that he was Named, but this was ridiculous. He got hit by a fireball right in the chest and thrown off the stone so I hurriedly made a series of platforms and reached him before he could get his idiot ass killed. I leaned over the hoist the orc by the scruff of the neck, smacking aside a smoky-looking spell, and resisted the urge to chew him out in the middle of an active battlefield.

"Where's Archer?" I asked instead.

"Fire," he replied, eyes going wide.

I cursed and dragged him through another jump – less than a hundred feet now, they were getting quicker.

"She said something about 'stealing your stuff'," he got out.

"She would," I bitterly complained.

I focused on the little bundle in the back of my mind and found Zombie the Third in flight, Archer on his back and whooping joyfully. Her tone was not any less obnoxious heard through a necromantic abomination's ears, apparently. I'd learned something today.

"This is going to hurt," I told Adjutant.

"Catherine, don't-"

I threw him, right at the bastion. My armour creaked under the strain but the orc flew and smacked right into the blue panes of light. Ah, they'd adjusted for physical stuff after Archer kept destroying their engines. That was unfortunate. On the bright side, they were now panicking so another two platforms had me landing atop the bastion while they did their level best to incinerate Hakram with hellflame. Break was on the edge of my lips, just waiting to be brought out and shatter their little protections, but I pushed down the urge. Not an aspect, not against second-stringers like these. My sword dug into the shield and my Name flared, sorcery impossibly turning into ice and cracking beneath the force. It shattered, and their protections must have been tied because the whole thing gave as one. I landed in a crouch, my frost-tinged armour glinting even in the shade, and let out a steamy breath. Hakram dropped down like a stone a heartbeat later, crashing without even the pretence of control and cursing loudly in Kharsum all the while.

Bastion, I thought as I placed it all in my mind's eye, was the right word for this. From the outside it looked like a broad tower of hewn stone, but up here it was revealed for what it was: a large fortified platform, for the use mages and engines. Fewer than a hundred mages left – attrition had taken its toll – and maybe thrice that in household troops and men who worked the engines. Actually taking the bastion, I thought, was perhaps not within my means. Wrecking it, though, absolutely was. It would have to do. The Fifth was lagging too far behind to be counted on for this.

"Though I be a speck of dust, I-" a man began incanting, and without blinking I raised my hand.

His throat filled with ice, his eyes froze over and just like that he died.

"Oh Merciless Gods," a woman whispered, then gathered herself. "WARDS."

Too late for that, I thought. Adjutant was back on his feet, though given his armour always looked like it had been put to the torch it was hard to tell whether the earlier flames had hurt him or not. He was moving fine, though. That would be enough: all I needed him to be was a target. The buzz of sorcery filled the air and the household troops advanced, but I ignored them entirely. I'd not come to kill rank and file, however pretty the armour. I dashed forward and lowered myself under a man's swing then slipped past him, shield coming up to swat aside the man behind and then I was through, past their forming defensive line. There were shouts behind but I paid them no attention, running to the mages. I carved through the first man's chest before he could even finish making a ball of flame, moving to the next before his corpse had even dropped. Taghreb and Soninke all of them, in rich robes and jewellery. The finest of the Wasteland. They died, one after another. Once I might have thought there would be something cathartic about scything through the very kind of people who'd plundered my homeland for decades, but I'd been wrong. All I felt was sickened.

This wasn't a fight, it was a massacre.

They formed their first ward before I'd slaughtered my way through the first dozen but it had been done in haste. I let Winter flow my veins and it broke under two swings, a pair of mages falling to their knees bleeding out of their eyes and nose when it shattered. I flicked my sword and a spear of ice went straight through a Taghreb's stomach even as I broke a man's skull with a smash of my shield. They were terrified, and the Beast was drinking it in like fine wine even as bile rose in my throat. A few of them banded together and managed to bind my shield with lightning, convulsions running up my arm, so I dropped it immediately. Before a heartbeat had passed I was elbow

deep in a man's ribcage, flesh parting like mud under gauntlet and Name strength.

"Monster," a sorcerer hissed.

"Amateurs," I judged them.

I withdrew my hand from the dead man, dripping red, and conceded the stranger might have something of a point. I stepped around the ten bolts of shadow he threw at me and ran him through anyway, because it was too late to flinch now. Not when I was surrounded by an army made up of my dead countrymen, lashed to these people's will. That I had blood on my hands did not make these mages better in some nebulous way: all it meant was that we were sharing similar gutters. The household troops were trying to get at my back, but they'd run into a problem called Adjutant. By the way he was moving, swifter and stronger with every swing, he'd called on his first aspect of the day. Rampage, I thought, would be enough to keep those out of the way for a while. I danced around another volley of spells, too quick for any of them to handle this close up, and Archer joining the fight was heralded by the loud crack of shattering wood. Zombie whinnied as he crashed into a trebuchet, his rider fluidly leaping down before impact, and my lips thinned. If Archer had broken my flying horse I was going to be *cross*. It wasn't like I could just waltz back into Arcadia to get another one.

"Sorry I'm late, had to make a detour," Archer called out.

"Mages first," I replied, in no mood for banter. "Then the engines."

It was poor form, I supposed, to tell the enemy our plan before it was carried out. I'd have hesitated if they actually stood a chance of stopping us. It'd been bad enough when I was the only fox in the henhouse, but with Archer having her knives out the mages were finished. After she cut the first one's throat any semblance of coordination went out the window and from there on it was just... work. Red labour, moving from one soon-to-be-dead man to another. Cut through the half-summoned devil, go around the spell, and then another corpse hit the ground. Dimly I realized I felt like throwing up. I pressed on anyway. After the last mage was dead Archer went to back Hakram and I turned to the engines. Seven trebuchets, twice as many scorpions. There'd been a few more of each before, but Archer had taken her toll earlier. I'd anticipated some fighting before breaking them, but apparently there'd be no need: all the people operating them had fled down the ramp while I whet my blade. Scorpions were easily dealt with, finicky things that they were: rip out the string, shatter the frame. The trebuchets were hulking masses I only vaguely understood the working of, so I kept it simple. There was a thick beam connecting the sling to the counterweight, going through the pivot above. I put my hand to the part of the beam

next to the string and froze the wood, then shattered it with the pommel of my sword. It should be enough to take them out of the battle. I turned to the still-ongoing scrap with the household troops and my brow rose.

They were still keeping in formation, to their honour. But Archer kept killing their officers whenever one spoke, so what had likely been meant as an orderly retreat down the ramp and into the wights was turning into a rout. Adjutant, I saw, was beginning to wind down. His Name thought the fight was spent, so the aspect was petering out. That could be dangerous, if he was still surrounded by soldiers. There was a mass of wights below the ramp in the back, but they'd not engaged. They were... fighting? But there were no legionaries down there. *Ah, I realized. We killed the mages guiding them. Now they're just tearing at anything in sight.* Some pockets still seemed to be orderly, and my guess at the culprit for that was the mages on the central bastion. The battle wasn't done because we'd softened up the left flank, though now the Fifth would have a much easier time punching through. I looked at the other strongholds, and saw the one on the right had already fallen. The Sixth's banner flew above it, now, and unlike me Black had been followed by legionaries. He'd not destroyed the engines: he'd ordered them turned on the undead. Of him I saw no trace, but in truth I didn't look for long.

The Twelfth, I saw, had followed behind the Sixth. They were fighting their way to the central bastion, though advance was slow and costly. How long had all of this taken? An hour, in whole? *And Akua must have prepared this field for months.* Even without the other Calamities, Black was a weight on the balance unlike any other. I went to reinforce Archer and Adjutant, and that was the last straw. The household troops fled into the clawing field of wights, judging all too accurately that they had better chances of survival down there than against the three of us. There was a heartbeat of silence, the three of us panting atop a stronghold surrounded by corpses, and I closed my eyes. I willed a sliver of my Name into the Link, finding it highly receptive. I had no fondness for Masego's father but he knew his way around enchantments.

"Black," I said. "My bastion's done."

There was the sound of steel against steel on the other side.

"Can you see the way into Liesse?" my teacher asked.

I squinted in the distance, towards where Kilian had pointed on the map earlier. There was, I saw, a pit. I couldn't see what was in it and it was surrounded by wights, but it was the only thing close to a gate I could find.

"I think so," I said. "Hole in the ground?"

"I will arrive momentarily," he said. "Have your Named join with the Twelfth for the assault on the last bastion. You and I will proceed into the city."

"I don't like the shape of that," I admitted.

"It has been taken into consideration," he replied. "Do not dawdle. Resistance is intensifying close to the pit, I will not be able to wait for long."

The sound cut and I frowned, trying to look for him on the field. There was a single man on a horse, swiftly cutting his way through the wights. Huh. He wasn't even fighting them, not really. He trampled exactly as many as he needed to go forward and ignored the rest. *And he's getting close*, I thought. Time to go.

"We've got orders," I said.

Archer snorted.

"Because I'm so fond of those," she said.

"They involve a lot of killing," I said.

"You have my attention," the wretch grinned.

"The two of you are going with the Twelfth to hit the last stronghold," I said. "Follow into the city after if you can, but that might not be feasible."

Hakram frowned.

"You're going on without us?" he said.

"Bonding time with Black," I said. "I assume some form of murder will be involved, possibly also a chilling speech on the nature of power. As prelude to further murdering."

"You have the weirdest relationships with people," Archer muttered.

Archer. *Archer* had said that. I did not dignify it with a response. I whistled sharply and Zombie rose from the trebuchet wreckage where he'd been lazing about this whole time, trotting up to me. I slipped a foot in the stirrup and mounted the saddle.

"Try not to bite off more than you can chew," I said. "I have a hard time believing *this* is the best Diabolist could do with months of preparation."

"I'll keep her out of trouble," Adjutant said.

Yeah, from that look on her face that wasn't happening. Ah, well. So long as neither of them died I'd live with it. Sheathing my sword, I spurred on my mount and after a gallop to the edge of the bastion his wings unfolded and we took flight. Black, I saw, was already at the edge of the pit. He'd either dismounted or lost his horse, but didn't seem all that hindered for it. I winced as I saw his shadow and blade move simultaneously, tendrils severing three spines and sword sending a head flying over the span of the same heartbeat. I used more power making a platform than he had using his shadow right then – he'd be able to keep this up for hours, no matter that he'd told me to hurry. Still, I guided Zombie in a low pass and threw myself down. I landed at his side, legs bending, and watched a dead hand flop the ground neatly severed. Charming. Zombie flew off and I straightened my back. Green eyes took in the state of me, then returned to the enemy.

"So is there a secret knock to get in?" I asked, glancing at the pit.

All I saw inside was darkness, and not even a kind my Name sight could see through.

"We're going to jump," he said.

"You're enjoying this," I accused.

"Am I?" he hummed, and pushed me.

I said some very unkind things about his ancestry in Taghreb as I dropped, and didn't stop even when he started falling at my side.

"You've considerably improved your vocabulary," he noted.

I sighed. Around us was only darkness, anchored by the sensation of falling. Considering this place was out of phase with Creation, I was wary of the fact that this felt like so long a drop. Akua had already shown she could meddle with the span of time in her little horror bubbles. After half an eternity our fall slowed and we landed softly on what felt like stone. Nice touch, that. She wasn't even going to pretend she'd not expected company. There was a tunnel ahead, its boundaries not marked by solid so much as absence. I could see again, at least. And what I saw was a large and looming silhouette at the end of it, ram horns sprouting from its head.

"A gatekeeper," Black said. "Quaint."

"She's a real traditional girl, our Akua," I drawled. "Twenty denarii she yammers at us through a runic array when get in."



"Twenty more she compares herself to Triumphant," Black replied amusedly. "They always do, Catherine. I've heard three dozen variations on that speech by now."

He paused.

"They quote the play," he said, pained. "Every time. I know the entire third act by rote."

"I'll take that," I mused. "She probably thinks she's above name-dropping, like this isn't basically a glorified flying fortress."

I raised my voice.

"That's right, Diabolist, I went there," I catcalled. "Your whole plan is so last millennium, and I bet you actually call your lair a lair when talking to other people."

I didn't look, but I got the impression Black's lips were twitching. Heavy footsteps sounded ahead, followed by the cloying smell of brimstone wafting up to us.

Two blades left their scabbard as one, and we advanced.

## Chapter 62: Verse

*"One hundred and eighty-seven: should one of your trusted companions be taken hostage at knife-point, check for the following features – cliff, moat, or any kind of sharp drop. Should one be nearby, you may assume the situation will solve itself momentarily."*

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Heavy footsteps and the scent of Hell, yet no ominous breathing. I got to see the reason for the absence the moment our opponent came into sight. The devil, for there was no denying it was that, stood a good twenty feet tall. Broad as cart, if not more, it had a shape almost human if humans could be of that size. It wore no clothes, its sculpted body made of something neither stone nor metal but evoking both, and in its hands it held a long mace that looked like a massive rib. Granite? Hard to tell, in the dark. Still, it was the head that drew attention or more precisely the lack thereof. Atop the devil's neck was only a polished surface, like someone had ripped off the head of a marble statue, and from the sides sprouted the ram horns I'd glimpsed earlier. Well, there went my usual plan. Decapitation did the trick with most everything, if you were thorough enough. For all that the devil lacked eyes it had no trouble keeping track of us, and for something its size it was damnably nimble. Also strong, I thought with a wince as the rib-mace smashed against the ground with a deafening sound.

Yeah, I wasn't getting hit by that if I could help it. I no longer had the Lone Swordsman's hero juice that would allow me to get back up afterwards.

It should have been, I thought, a difficult scrap. But it wasn't, because the two of us were moving seamlessly. It wasn't like with Adjutant, who was a limb of my own, or the way it had when the Woe had... come together in Dormer. Black was just always in the right place, like he had a supernatural sense telling him where that was. The devil leaned forward to smash down the mace on me and my teacher was right behind, edge of his sword flashing with shadow as he carved a scar on the thing's back. It screamed mouthlessly and turned, swinging wildly, but he was exactly half a step out of the arc. Its free hand reach for Black, fingers creaking as they moved, but then I was free to act and my blade went into the back of its knee. Not, sadly, deep enough to push through. But enough it turned screaming again, and when it did Black hacked halfway through its mace-wielding wrist. The devil went wild and the both of us backed away smoothly, one behind it and one before, neither of us out even slightly out of breath.

There was a game of shatranj being played here, with every step and every swing, and the devil was losing it. Much as I would have liked to say I was a player unto myself, I wasn't. I was just... part of the dance. Another moving part my teacher worked with as he orchestrated the death of a creature that could easily have torn its way through a full company of heavies without taking a wound. Sometimes I forgot that, for all that I'd mostly seen Black scheme and lead men, his Name was that of a killer of heroes. To be the Black Knight was to be the right hand of the Dread Emperor, the slayer of the anointed champions of the Heavens. There was no searing light or shouted righteousness, down here, but there was death. Being painted on a canvas of flesh, one stroke at a time. I enjoyed being part of that as much as I hated it. Following the lead of a professional was... soothing, and the victory being arranged would be sweet. But it'd been some time since I'd had anyone above me in the pecking order on the battlefield. The feel of it was like fly that wouldn't quit buzzing around me.

When the devil emerged from the wild frenzy that had seize it, we advanced again. It leapt back, over my head, but nimble or not it was *heavy*. A twist of will had a spear of frost ramming into its side, doing little but breaking skin but slamming it against the side of the corridor. Absence, that was what the boundary looked like, but whatever it was it was not lightly shaken: the devil smashed against it and fell scrabbling to its feet. Neither of us intended to give it the breathing room. The rib-mace skidded against the ground, moving so blindingly fast it was a blur, but I leaned into my instincts – I felt the breath of death under my feet, cloak rustling, but already I was rolling forward and beneath its guard. There was a sound like stone breaking and the

devil half-collapsed forward. I stepped to the side of the falling torso and hacked at its sides, for lack of better target, frost touching the wounds I made and never leaving. I smelled a kill.

"Withdraw," Black said.

I moved without hesitation. The creature did not attack, and I got a look at why: while I'd been distracting it in the front, my teacher had slipped behind and deepened the wound in the back of the knee until the entirely limb was cut off. The devil, struggling to keep us at bay with its mace, roughly tried to force back its severed parts together. To my distaste, I saw the unearthly material began to mend itself. Of course Akua had some kind of self-healing abomination, which also shrugged off my power in anything but strong concentration and who was fucking twenty feet tall as a gatekeeper. Her ego probably didn't allow her to be any random asshole, she had to be Queen Asshole, reigning queen of all the assholes in the world.

"Now," Black said, when the stitch job was half-done.

The devil screamed again, and I was close enough to feel the sound coming from its entire body. It was the thing itself screaming, and the act that nothing to do with mouth or throat. I pressed forward without flinching. I realized what my teacher's intent had been a moment before it bore fruit. The devil attempted to rise to its feet to fight us but the stitching was not yet complete: the moment it put weight on the limb, the healing broke and it fell down again. Typical Black, I thought. I might have been the kill the thing brawling up close, but it in his eyes the uncertainty was not worth the risk. Instead we'd withdrawn to create another occasion, one for a clean kill. It was the fighting style of a man who'd spent his entire life killing heroes. Knowing the dice would always favour the other side, he'd learned to remove chance from the equation entirely. It was an alien way of killing to me, who tended to double down when things got risky instead. *But there's a reason he's lived this long when heroes keep taking a swing at his neck, and I'm looking at it.*

Frost swept up my sword and I drove the blade into the back of the devil fallen at my feet. From the corner I could see Black cutting through the back of its mace-wielding elbow, motions fluid and not a single one wasted. The devil screamed but it was done. With a last attempt at taking me in hand it tried to rally, but from where my blade had sunk into its flesh ice was spreading inside. The hand never reached me, the limb itself frozen and I kept pouring Winter's power into its frame. From the beginning to the end, the fight could not have lasted longer than a quarter hour. Neither of us had taken a single hit, or been in any great danger of dying. There'd be a grand total of two words spoken

throughout, no quips or taunts – the absence had been heavy it would have felt like whistling during a sermon to start. I spat to the side, out of breath more for use of my mantle than because of physical tiredness.

There'd been a lot of talk since I became the Squire about the similarities between us, but this... execution had just laid the differences bare for all to see. We both used chaos, but the manner was different. The dark-haired man would wait patiently, put himself in the correct position, and then set fire to the field. He'd then ruthlessly capitalized on those weaknesses, using chaos as just another tool in his arsenal. Me, though? Chaos followed wherever I went, so I'd made it my home grounds. Learned to drink and breathe that kind of mess, so that when it hit the field I was the only one unhindered. It'd gotten me through two messes in Arcadia, Marchford and Summerholm, but never without a price. On the surface his way of doing things was flatly superior and I still intended to learn from it, but I wasn't Black. I didn't have that kind of calculation in me. And though Akua had been full of shit when she'd called him a rat in a maze of traps, she'd touched something true: my teacher's way only worked so long as he was prepared. It was, in a word, *fragile*.

I could learn from him without turning in a shoddier version of who he was. I had to, or the fights ahead would cost me a lot more than Nauk.

"*Mongowa-umun*," Black said in Mtethwa. "It was a greater devil, though not a famous one. Likely an old Sahelian contract kept secret for a rainy day."

"She only had one of those left, according to my sources," I replied. "I expected it to be deeper in the city, to be honest."

"There will be worse," Black said, shaking his head. "A host, yes, but that will not be the thrust of her defence. The old breed has always preferred sorcery to armies, in the end. Sorcery comes from a single will, armies have to share victory."

"Wards," I said. "But we have a layout of those. Thief saw to that."

"Two things must you face, when breaking a High Lord," Black murmured, quoting from one of Terribilis II's treatises. "Tall and ancient walls, manned by wrath. Then the seat of power, where old devils lie."

"This isn't a Wasteland city," I said. "She didn't have ten centuries to fill her vaults with every different shade of madness she could think of."

"It is a manner of thinking, Catherine," he replied. "Her seat of power, the Ducal Palace, will be where she has invested greatest effort."

"Frontal assault's not an option, then," I grimaced. "Not that I'd seriously considered, given the army in the city and whatnot."

Pale eyes glanced at me and he nodded.

"Your little surprises," he said. "Do you have way to contact them?"

"There's a mage along," I admitted. "But it's not like either of us can scry. Akua bailing out of Creation wasn't part of the plan. Instructions were given before the operation began."

"I am uncertain what that would result in, if currently carried out," Black said. "There is a need to account for that liability."

"You want me to find them?" I said. "I never liked the metaphor, but needle and haystack. And in this case the needle is both murderous and actively hiding."

"Think, Catherine," he softly said, "about the fight ahead of us. The shape of it. In the process of that confrontation, can we afford to have a sudden tipping point of unknown timing and effect?"

I grimaced. If this were just me, I'd say yes. I was confident that, whatever came of it, I'd be better at dealing with it than Diabolist. I didn't care about what actually happened as much as I did what I could make *from* that. But that wasn't the way Black worked, and considering he was the mentor in this little jaunt of ours maybe sticking to the safe side was the better notion. I was still wary that he'd told me to leave Adjutant and Archer behind. There were a lot of stories that could spring from the two of us hitting Diabolist's lair alone, and few ended well for him.

"So I look for them," I said. "In the trapped horror-city swarming with undead and mages. Gods, you always take me to the worst places."

"No," he said. "I have... a notion for their use. Make your way to the Ducal Palace and prepare an approach. *Quietly.*"

My fingers clenched. I studied his face and found it as inscrutable as ever, pale and calm and seemingly in control.

"You know I'm not great at the courtesies, so you'll have to forgive if I'm being too blunt," I said. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

He cocked his head to the side but did not reply. He didn't seem offended, but then he didn't seem much of anything at all – I was well aware that the only reason I saw mild curiosity on his face was because he was letting me.

"I went along with this because I thought you had a plan," I said. "Something that doesn't end up with you taking a spell for me or dying to free me from some trap. But I have to ask, Black, are you actually *trying* to die? Because us going off on our own before we pick a fight with Diabolist reeks of you being there in chains when I enter her throne room."

My tone turned harsh.

"I don't care if you think you've reached the end of the rope," I bit out. "I'm not going to help you go out in a blaze of futility. Gods Below, this is *Akua*. She has a magic weapon and a fortress of doom, but you've taught me since the moment I became a claimant that the story she began only ends one way. This isn't just foolish, it's actively detrimental to the Empire. I don't care if you're Named, we're on the eve of war with the Principate – now is not the time to start sacrificing our best generals."

I was panting by the end of it, fear and anger having bled out into my voice. I hated how vulnerable I'd sounded, even if I'd scrupulously avoided making this personal.

"If you are quite finished?" Black calmly asked, and I grunted in agreement. "Good. You misunderstand me. I've no intention of dying today, Catherine, though it is certainly possible regardless. You have not seen my full hand, so to speak."

"You know better than that," I said. "Tricks going against the current don't *stick*. It makes it seem like you have a chance for the moment, but then Creation fucks you anyway because it's a very large machine and you're a very small grain of sand."

"Of this," he replied, "I am aware. And yet I would proceed."

It was tempting to ask him what had him so sure he'd make it out, but even if there'd been a guarantee *Akua* wasn't listening in – which there wasn't – I didn't believe he would have told me. Black was more pile of secrets than man, sometimes, and he did not share those without good reason. My fear, even for him, did not qualify.

"This is what you'd say," I murmured, "if you were trying to force a succession on me."

"Yes," he acknowledged serenely.

"And you know how to fool the Name tricks for lying," I said.

He'd been the one to teach them to me, after all.

"I do," he agreed.

"But you want me to believe you anyway," I finished.

He inclined his head, conceding the point.

"A leap of faith," the Black Knight said, and for some reason he sounded amused.

I'd learned to recognize pivots, to feel the weight of their touch on my life. I'd come a long way since first hearing the word, Juniper telling me of it under the stars months after I'd made my first choice that mattered. Not a Choice, no, not the way the Book of All Things spoke of it, but perhaps something touching the facet of that greater concept. In the collection of decisions and acts that made up a Name, the *stuff* of it, some mattered more than others. This? This was not one. I breathed out and sharpened my mind but there was no fulcrum to be found. No sense that scales could be shifted. Was it because he was being truthful, that my wariness was unfounded? *Or is it because he has already made a choice of his own, and it has long been out of my hands?* I could not keep a man who sought death from it, I knew. Much less one as able as my teacher.

The part of me that was Catherine Foundling yet not, the girl I was and had been but seen through the darkened ice that was Winter and my Name, crept up my spine inexorably. It told me that if this was unacceptable, I should force my will upon it. Brand his soul with a queen's decree, that he would struggle for life whatever the costs. But that whispering thing met pale green eyes, so calm and measured, and it faltered. It would be fair, it insisted. Once, in Summerholm, he had robbed me of my own will before swinging nooses. Though that debt had grown muddled by the ways we had intertwined since, it would stand so long as it was not repaid. I was Callowan, after all, even now. We were a people of long grudges. I forced the set of ugly instincts down. Warlock had not been wrong, to call me *other*. I wondered if all the villains I'd jeered at in the old stories, called fools for not thinking it through, had started out like me. Bargain after bargain, one desperate compromise after another until you hardly recognized the creature looking back at you in the mirror. Damnation never felt like damnation until it was too late, did it? I forced myself to be Catherine Foundling and no one else, the coldness in my veins slowly receding.

"You told me once, that you thought of martyrdom as an act of cowardice," I said. "Symbolic vanity."

"And I stand by those words," Black said.

I closed my eyes and breathed out.

"Don't you dare make me grieve you," I whispered.

The sentiment passed, and my eyes opened. I found his matching mine, brown and green and neither giving ground.

"Into the breach we go, Black Knight," I said.

"Into the breach, Squire," he softly agreed.

## **Interlude: Liesse I**

*"Do not ever speak of victory before the last foe is dead."*

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

Juniper of the Red Shields spat to the side. This was going to be messy business, and she told Aisha as much.

"The Lord Warlock should be able to hold the gate until we arrive," her old friend replied.

The Named had mustered up a storm of green acid in front of the opening, and for now nothing was coming out but already the spell was thinning.

"The Lord Fucking Warlock wants us to establish a beachhead on the other side," the general said. "He better pull his godsdamned weight if he wants it done."

Spellcasters, always a finicky lot. Orcs as a rule put little stock in them. The Miezens has slaughtered the old shaman lines wholesale and what remained after was little more than bone-tellers and mystics. They made ceremonies worth bearing with, but in a fight they were decoration. The Clans lived and died on steel. Praesi were made for them, though, meddled with all kinds of nasty shit in the blood to get better with the 'Gift'. No wonder the whole breed was half-mad. Mages had their place in the modern legions, as field artillery and field healers, but something like the Sovereign of Red Skies could only make her uneasy. You couldn't have that kind of power without it costing you somewhere else. Even Catherine had changed, since she'd killed her way to a fae title, and not just that her temper froze tables now. She only had one foot on the ground now with the rest of them, now. Juniper could live with it. Foundling's mind had always been like a bag of rabid badgers, as long as she kept that pointed at the enemy it wasn't too much of an issue.

She'd ordered the Fifteenth to begin reorienting before she ever got the order from Lord Black, reading the lay of the battlefield. Someone needed to plug the gap, else the Fourth would be cut off from the rest of the army, and only her legion was in the right place. The Deoraithe were technically closer, but they were a fucking mess at the moment. When Sahelian's



people had brought out the demons, aside with screwing with Legion scrying it had also made an impassable wall in the enemy centre. The three legions sent in as the first wave had moved around smoothly, the Fifth taking to the left and the Sixth to the right with the Twelfth behind it, but Kegan's soldiers weren't legionaries. Most of them hadn't seen combat except with the Fifteenth, gone soft now that the Clans no longer raided the Marches. The grinder that had been the Summer Campaign had already cut away the worst of the chaff, but getting blooded didn't make them any better trained. The Duchy of Daoine didn't usually go on the offensive, and it was showing badly today.

The first wave of archers, right behind the three legions, had split in two. One half heading for either side, circling around the demon grounds. But they were shit at it. They'd lost all cohesion, their formation turning into some kind of wavy column instead of the tightly packed ranks they should have been. The entire left half had slowed to a crawl the moment the Hellgate opened, afraid of being flanked but opening themselves to it just by milling around like scared herd animals. The infantry behind them was worse, in a way. They'd kept to the long rectangle formation they'd been sent forward as, but they fucking idiots kept advancing. When the front ranks realized they were about to either hit the tail ends of both archer contingents or tread too close to the demon grounds they'd tried to stop, but the officers in the back hadn't cottoned on yet. There was nothing quite like watching over ten thousand Deoraithe warriors trip all over themselves to make a woman wonder how exactly these fucks had managed to hold the Wall in the face of her people for over a millennium.

Marshal Ranker was now in command of the army and she was trying to clean up the mess before it got them all killed, but scrying was still touch and go even with the warlock's get putting the demons in some kind of egg bubble. At least they weren't running rampant – if Hierophant managed to keep that up until the battle ended, she'd kiss him full on the bloody mouth. Wouldn't even complain about his ugly soft cow teeth. According to protocol the Legions had gone back to flag and horn signalling, but the Deoraithe weren't familiar with most of those. Trying to order them around like that would only add to the chaos. Juniper had managed to get one of Marshal Ranker's staff officers in a scrying link and gotten authority over the Deoraithe for the moment, but she'd already sent messengers on foot to Duchess Kegan by then. It rankled to break the line of command like this, but it was her men going into the breach now. She wasn't taking any chances, even if it ruffled feathers. Juniper watched the battle unfold in front of her, splayed out for her to see, and then closed her eyes. She breathed out, and let the pieces move.

The Fifth under General Orim had managed to take the leftmost bastion after Catherine slaughtered her way through the mages

there, but it was having trouble to pierce further in. Her mother's Sixth had the rightmost bastion, but they'd gained too much ground under the Black Knight: they wouldn't be able to go back on the offensive until they'd consolidated their lines. General Afolabi's Twelfth was getting ripped apart taking a swing at the last remaining bastion, but they'd earned their cognomen the hard way. *Holdfast*. They'd proved the truth of that at Dormer against Summer nobles and they were showing it again: losses were heavy, but they were going forward and they weren't flinching in the slightest. Gods, the Twelfth would be a skeleton of a legion by nightfall. The Ninth under General Sacker hadn't even tried to swing around the entire army to get at the Hellgate, they were headed straight for the fields of stakes making up the flanks beyond the right palisade. If she got there quick enough, she could smash into the wights from the side and take the pressure off the Sixth.

Good. The front wasn't in danger of collapsing, so long as General Orim remained cautious and Hierophant didn't drop the ball. The Fourth under Marshal Ranker had made a well-oiled turnabout and was now headed for the Hellgate from behind, but that'd take most an hour if she didn't want her men dead on their feet when they got there. The only arrows in Juniper's quiver were the Fifteenth and whatever Deoraithe she could scrape up. Eight thousand under her direct command five thousand legionaries and a half. Two thousand and a half heavy horse, though. Callowan knights. There was much that could be done with that, at least on this side of the gate. She had no intelligence on what lay on the other side, so initial approach would have to be centred around advance and containment. The breach would have to wait until she had area secured, and she was not looking forward to sending men into that. Much as she hated to even think it, she was missing Nauk. The man was an unseemly emotional brute without finesse, but if you had to send a vanguard into Hell he was the breed of officers you wanted at the head of it. Senior Tribune Jwahir was steadier than the legate had been, but she didn't have the same bite.

"Juniper," Aisha said. "The storm's broken. I don't know how many they gathered on the other side, but it's not a trickle coming out. Full battalions and – *shit*. *Akalibsa*. Those are are *akalibsa*."

Taghreb loan word. The orc's mind spun back to the lessons at the College until she found where she'd heard it before. Imperial civil war, Battle of the Black Grounds. Summoned by the Warlock of the time to bolster the usurping Chancellor's expedition into the Steppes.

"Dog-devils," Juniper said.

Incarnations of blind hatred. An old favourite of Taghreb mages, much like the *walin-falme* for the Soninke. No wings, but swift on their feet and they bore their own arms and armour. It had long endeared them to the desert tribes, who in ancient times had lacked the means to provide these to their war-summoned devils. The general opened her eyes, and watched the flood pour out.

"Aisha, sound the horns," she said, baring her teeth. "The horse is to peel to the left and await my signal to charge. The Fifteenth is to stagger as follows: right forward, then centre, then left."

Her friend's slender face creased, but she nodded. Juniper watched her legion move and waited. The waltz had begun.

—

Hierophant cocked his head to the side.

He was a mile away from his foes, but that little mattered nowadays. His eyes had been touched by Summer sun in the fullness of its glory, and little that was under the sky lay hidden to them. What had once been sight of sorcery's shaping granted by the enchantments Father had laid upon his spectacles was now part of him, and fae flame had filed that working down to sharp point. The press of sweating and bleeding soldiers between himself and his quarry were ignored, gone from his vision with but a thought, and all that remained was foe. Threefold summon had brought them into Creation, an oddity he would have enjoyed discussed with his father had there been time. He'd believed the concept to have been discredited, for while in theory the overlapping of Dues helped lower the power required in practice the fine tuning required made it too risky for the benefits. No mage fool enough to take chances when summoning a demon lived long, much less three.

Admittedly, it had been something of a challenge to contain all of them simultaneously. It had to be a single working, for three different wards of that magnitude were beyond his ability to maintain and if he'd attempted to split between a ward covering to and the other one the imbalance of power would have been... difficult to deal with. Overall efficiency was lowered by containing such different entities with the same spell, but this way lowered the risks of calamitous failure. Still, the amount of bleed displeased him greatly. It was the demon of Order that was hardest to handle, as Father had suspected he might. Whether the Beast of Hierarchy truly was the old monster that shattered the city of Shango and ripped it from Creation he could not be certain, but it was proving rather troublesome. By their nature the breed was difficult to contain, though thankfully much less prone to fast-spreading infection than the likes of Madness and Corruption. The issue was that the demon's effect on Creation was... selective, for a lack of better term.

Beasts of Hierarchy took creational laws, the hierarchy of the world as set by the Gods, and replaced them with something superficially similar but at cross-purposes. Air still existed, yet could not be breathed. Solid was as liquid, friction added where there should be none. Points became fixed without rhyme or reason, and so many other weavings: there were as many ways for the demon of Order to act as there were creational laws, if not more. There'd been reports that – ah, perhaps another time. Masego frowned as the demon of Apathy ceased its attempts to bleed through the Ivory Globe, instead gathering its essence into itself. Clever thing. Demons were not truly sentient, of course, or at least not in a way mortals could understand. At best they could imitate such intelligence. But they could solve problems, regardless, and this demon was attempting to turn its own corruption onto the very ward containing it. Apathy, this kind had been given as a title, but it ran deeper. It slowed and ended the movement of all forces, physical and metaphysical. The trick at work was an attempt to make his ward cease to flow, becoming so brittle it would shatter.

Runes forming under his fingers, the braided mage hummed. The globe of cleansing ivory light shattered and the demon moved without hesitation – indeed, it was incapable of such a thing – but Hierophant was not longer a green boy. He had seen wonders and horrors, had them seared into his soul so deeply they had changed his very nature.

"Glint on glass, stolen yet earned," he murmured. "Passing jewel, foe's crown: *dawn*."

For a single glorious moment, he saw all of it again. The sun of Summer in all its furious implacable might. Even the mere remembrance the ground scorched for thirty feet around him in a perfect circle. It was no kinder to the demon. Scathing light burned the envelope of thick murky skin around the core of it, ripping it to black shreds as the creature let out a sound that was neither pain nor anything at all – there mere excretion of it was a burden upon Creation wherever it sounded, a slowing of all it touched. The demon folded upon itself, surrendering its outer essence, and as the dawn passed Masego formed the Ivory Glow anew around it. It had gone, he saw, twenty feet forward. Another forty and it would be close enough to affect nearby soldiery, who would have panicked had they enough of their mind left to do so. The touch of Apathy would fade after a few more moments, but never entirely leave them. There would always be that empty space within, sapping away at all they were.

The Beast of Hierarchy had changed law while he'd been distracted, and with a downturn of the lips Masego adjusted the Ivory Globe's frequency. Too much went through anyway. Keeping the demon fixed in its current position, he mused, would not be the issue. It could not apply its essence to the Ivory Globe

itself, for Hierophant had usurped the properties of the divine in crafting them. His study of the angel's corpse near Liesse had borne fruit in this regard. Yet their struggle was, ultimately, one of repertoire. So long as Masego could grasp the creational law being substituted and knew of a working to remedy this, its grasp outside the ward would be highly limited. The moment he failed on either counts, however, the spread would begin to work its way through the battlefield. The demon of Madness was proving difficult enough already, concerning that. Though in no danger of escaping, at the very moment his ward ebbed low a sliver of the creature's essence pushed through. With Order and Apathy, this was regrettable but of no great concern. Madness was another story.

Its effect lingered, accumulated and spread. Already for twenty feet around it the fabric of Creation was irremediably tainted and would have to be purified beyond recognition, lest anyone wandering these grounds from here to the end of time be taken by red madness. Though not the most dangerous of breeds to fight, the true ability of their kind was in the spread. The longer it remained, the more dangerous it became. It was no wonder that when Triumphant had come upon Liesse, though she had myriad demons of all Hells it was a demon of Madness she had sent to the city. Half a night had been enough to destroy the entire city, and the taint would have spread to the entire region if left unchecked much longer. Even as Masego adjusted the Globe again to check the Beast of Hierarchy, it occurred to him that he was but a single man trying to contain a flood with his bare hands. He would, in time, fail. He'd been reliably informed by Archer that some performers in Levant walked tightropes tall in the air for the entertainment of screaming peasantry, and perhaps this was an apt metaphor. The dark-skinned mage could, in fact, walk the metaphorical rope.

He could not, however, keep doing it for hours without slipping.

Adjusting the Globe again – the Beast was becoming swifter in recognizing when it failed to wade through, which was worrying – Hierophant turned his eyes to that tall platform of stone that still remained in rebel hands. There was a technical name for it, he mused, but he could not remember. Flat, low tower? Fat, short stronghold? The lack of precision was like an itch he couldn't scratch, but he forced himself to move on. Sorcery was being woven there, of no small scale. Were they to resume assaulting his wards? That had been deeply unpleasant. Unable to strike directly at them he'd had to pour power to fix the holes being made, which would have exhausted him into sloppiness if they'd kept it up for much longer. He simply could not abide sloppiness. The glass eyes took a broader view of the threads of sorcery being braided, but after a moment he dismissed it. Necromancy, which was none of his concern. His sight returned to the demons. Brushing back a braid Masego thought of a conversation he'd once

had with Catherine, years ago. They'd been speaking of the hero Hunter, then still among the living, and she'd uttered the strange saying that when that kind of man smiled you called what he showed *arrow-catchers*.

He'd naturally informed her that even for a Named, attempting to catch an arrow with one's teeth would likely result in either shattered teeth or an arrow going through the roof of the mouth. She'd looked at him with that tolerantly amused look of hers, and explained that that was the joke. A very poor one, in his opinion, but it had to be said most things to come out of Callow were hopelessly shabby. Still, the little talk had stuck with him. He looked at the demons and traced runes, High Arcana one and all. The Ivory Globes winked out.

Hierophant bared his teeth, and tried to catch an arrow.

—

"Bless that child," Marshal Ranker said quietly, watching the Fifteenth move. "She inherited the best of both her parents."

The goblin was not a withered old witch like the Matrons in the Eyries, obsessed with bloodlines. It was true that goblins of matron lines were larger and stronger, cleverer and even lived longer – but Ranker had learned the reason for it when she became Matron, and wondered if the price for it was not too steep. Her people had done ugly things to survive on the surface, after losing their ancient underground kingdom to the dwarves. Yet, for all that she put less stock in breeding, it could not be denied that few girls had been better bred for war than Juniper of the Red Shields. Istrid Knightsbane was living legend, earned on the Fields of Streges, and the girl's father had been worth stories in his own days. Oguz Sharphand was the reason Grem One-Eye was called such, and few champions had been more acclaimed among the Clans until his legs were crippled. No, General Juniper was worthy of her rank regardless of youth. She'd begun sending the Fifteenth forward before the orders ever came, and now as Ranker watched the legion stagger as the cavalry peeled off she felt a sharp grin split her face. She knew that formation from reading her histories. The Callowans had used one much the same, when they'd crushed Dread Emperor Nefarious at the Fields of Streges.

Few of her own officers would have thought of using the old kingdom's tactics, even with knights under their command. For all that Legion doctrine was flexible and comprehensive, it encouraged one to think within a certain box of tools. Some of the sharpest tools on Calernia, yes, and they had proved their worth again and again. Yet for a commander to ever be considered for marshal, they had to prove they were able to think beyond that box. Istrid's daughter had that steel in her, though it was not yet properly tempered. *Grem is come again*, she thought. The torch had hands worthy of being passed to. The Fourth was heavier

on sappers than most legions, and so turning it around after the Hellgate opened had not been so slow as it should have been. The regulars would lag slightly behind, but if General Juniper succeeded in seizing this side of the gate then sappers would be useful in keeping it even alone. There was need to hurry, regardless. The Sahelian chit had pulled a fast one on them with that gate, deploying it just after Ranker's legion was too far gone to pull back in time.

Orim was getting the short end of the stick, much like he had after the Conquest when he'd been sent to watch over Liesse and a pack of squabbling Callowans. The Squire had fallen onto that flank like an avalanche of death and ripped straight through the bastion, but she was gone now and the Fifth had to stand its ground against foes that outnumbered it brutally. The wights without necromancers guiding them were not as much as a threat, however, and in truth the lot of them had not impressed Ranker overmuch. If the Dead King's host was of this make, then the Procerans must be even more shit soldiers than she'd thought. Any nation that warred so much had no business being so bad at it, though she wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth considering the fights ahead. Her Fourth was halfway to the Hellgate, when she felt the ripple. *Felt* it, like a physical thing. Rheumy eyes turned back to the battle behind, and what she saw had her blood run cold.

The rebels were raising the dead. This, they had expected. It was an old Wasteland trick to have the enemy's own dead turn against them halfway into the battle. The Legions had followed protocol, keeping sappers near corpse-piles when feasible. But it was more than that. The wights, it was the wights that had been the true intent. They'd thought that killing the mages meant they could no longer be controlled, that more casters were needed, but now the tide turned on the overextended legions as one. And they were no longer mindless. The undead stood in ranks now, in formations instead of an unruly mass. They moved and killed with purpose. Marshal Ranker had seen more battles than nearly anyone alive in the Empire. This, she realized in moment of perfect clarity, had been a trap. Since the beginning. From the positioning of the demons in the centre to split their forces to ground being given, all to draw them in as deep as possible with reinforcements split and too far behind. The rebels had sacrificed hundreds of their own mages, the favourite sons and daughters of Praes, to set up this very moment where the jaws closed in on the Legions of Terror. They'd been too used to winning, Ranker understood with anguish. We didn't think they'd *learned*.

Mind spinning, she unfolded what was going to happen. The Fifth, too far deep, was about to be overwhelmed. Afolabi's Twelfth Legion would be ground into the Sixth's flank until it collapsed, weakened as it was. And though the right flank would hold, Orim would break and the wights would spill through. Either they'd

swing around and hit Istrid, or they'd ram into the back of the Fifteenth while it attempted to contain the gate. If the Fifth was scattered, the battle was lost.

"Sound the horns," Ranker ordered hoarsely. "We're reinforcing Orim. Now, at *running speed*."

Then the wards keeping the demons contained winked out and screams beyond mortal understanding sounded across shadowed sky.

## **Interlude: Liesse II**

*"There's not a lot of difference between court and a swamp. Colourful things are poisonous, lots of buried corpses, crocodiles are often involved."*

– Dread Empress Prudence the First, the 'Frequently Vanquished'

Masego had forged his first dimensional pocket at the age of fourteen, the gruelling work of six months resulting in accessible space no larger than a cramped closet. Though the access and retrieval patterns had been flawless, the result was ultimately flawed: nearly half the power invested by ritual had gone to waste despite his best efforts. Father had refused him another attempt until he further improved his craft, as the costs of such an undertaking were... prohibitive. It was only in the days after the Liesse Rebellion, when he had a mage's tower of his own, that he'd returned to the chalkboard and tried again. The power of his Name had granted him perception and control beyond that of any mortal mage, and though Masego had always disdained relying on those powers he'd hated the thought of an imperfect product even more. He'd come within razor's breadth of the Due, and with a weaving of High Arcana made a full room only he could access. He'd considered it a worthy effort, then, though still short of the perfection he aspired to. His horizons had expanded since.

He had tread the grounds of Arcadia since, Winter and Summer and the hinterlands between. He'd laid naked eye on the silent line between Creation and other realms, shaped and breached it according to his whims. His path to understanding High Arcana did not lay in the study of boundaries, not like his father's, yet he had learned. One could not witness the seams of what the Gods had sown together without deriving insight from the act. The boy he'd been, who watched the world end, stepping into the silhouette of the man he now was and understanding that, in the end, it was all a lie. An agreement, a lending of form and function that was by definition temporary. In time, all this would end. That which was beheld was moulded by the shape of the beholder, and as runes whirled around him in patterns the Hierophant smiled. The sun had burned sight from him and so he had made the sun his sight, carving open the stuff of miracles for his due.



No throne was so great it could not be toppled by madman's writ.

Creation sang under his guiding hand, melody woven and folding unto itself. The fabric of the world wrapped itself around the demons before they could flee his reach, forcing them into a realm that was Creation and yet not. Foam on the wave, for a fleeting instant made a realm into itself. An instant was all that Hierophant was need, for so long as the unit existed the span was his to fashion. Masego stepped forward into the pocket he had wrested from nothing, his lie made truth by will imposed, and found the realm stretching as far as the eye could see. To bring strife to demons inside a closed realm, Father always said, was madness. Yet here he was, watching a shifting maze of smoke and mirrors, and in his bones he could feel the essences of his foes spreading. The Beast of Hierarchy wielded its own as a hammer, attempting to shatter the frame, but it was in a cage beyond its understanding. The realm broke, but all that did was set an ending. When that ending came was in the hands of the Hierophant, and he was not yet done done with his creation.

Madness whispered song sweet and insidious, echoing across haze and empty spaces, but found no purchase. The strife it sought to sow reflected upon itself, parted smoke without ruination. It was Apathy that sunk its claws into the realm, the scars it left wherever it tread beyond even his mending. No furrows in matter, no, simply... inertness. Matter made so still in all incarnations it might as well have been void. It had become the most dangerous of the three, yet this was not beyond Hierophant's prediction. Apathy was the oldest foe of wonder, and wonder was now the lens he perceived the world through. To destroy his enemy had always been where the trick of this would lay, Masego knew. It was the Heavens that granted their own the power to unmake even foreign essence through burning indignation, for in their stale eyes there was no place for such contamination in the orderly world that was to be built. The Gods Below granted no such boon, and had taught their own different lesson. *Though we all lose in this summoning, what does it matter so long as the foe loses more?*

To Evil, victory mattered more than the aftermath of that glorious moment.

Akua Sahelian's cohorts had learned this well, bringing their arsenal of ruin into the world. The flickering bindings he could see shackling the beasts spoke not of control, but of direction. A plague unleashed with the understanding that it would bring ruin to all it touched until fear pulled the leash and ripped them from Creation. It would have been child's play in this realm, for Hierophant to sharpen his will and rip through the runes. Yet in doing so he would sunder the means of recall. Summoning made into true presence, no longer contingent on the consent of mortal men. To catch the light of the Heavens and shine it a lantern upon this place would have done well, but Hierophant had seen too

little. Glimpses of Contrition, before he knew how to watch, and stood witness to the corpse of an angel of which only white dry bones were left. There was no miracle for him to vivisect and assemble to his will, not even the shadow of one. He could not dismiss or destroy, and so only one path remained Hierophant.

"To borrow the fang of the beast, and strike the beast with it," Masego sighed. "How very crude."

Runes flared around his hand and the skin bubbled like water, until it parted bloodlessly and a drop of ichor flew from it. It had remained there since Marchford, so weak as to be cauterized and contained yet never entirely gone. Corruption. A perfect drop of it. The dark-skinned man turned to the maze of his own making, and felt the weight of his foes' attention bearing down on him.

"Let us play a game, creatures," he said mildly. "I call it 'burning down the house with everyone in it'."

The drop of ichor sunk into the ground and Hierophant began.

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Brandon Talbot, Grandmaster of the Order of the Broken Bell, leaned forward on his mount. Heliotrope's flanks were covered with sweat under the armour, but the Liessen charger was still far from exhausted. They were a hardy breed, raised for war. Once the favoured mounts of many chivalric orders, when their kind had still been the pride of Callow instead of the last remnant. But that remnant still stood, under its own banner if one suborned to the Tower through complicated ties of rule and authority. That was worthy of pride, if only a little, and today the last scion of House Talbot allowed himself to feel it. This, he thought, was the kind of battles he'd been born for. That they had all been born for. Not bitter struggles with fae or the petty butchering of traitors in his liege's own camp. Though the foot at the side of his knights was Legion instead of Royal Guard, against them both was arrayed the old enemy. Hellspawn garbed in stone, with the fangs and faces of rabid dogs baying for the death of all men. There was purity to this moment that he'd sorely missed from his days as a rebel vagrant in the south, a beautiful clarity. One side rode knights, to protect the people of Callow. On the other stood devils and sorcerers, spawn of the vicious East. It was the manner of battles his ancestors had fought, and there was honour to be found in this.

The painting was marred by the truth that his comrades were often greenskins and Wastelanders, but Brandon had been taught patience by the woe the Liesse Rebellion had brought to the cause. A lesson his aunt had once known, but discarded when she began to believe she would not live to see the kingdom of her youth forged anew — save if she struck deal with the Procerans, a bargain with the devils to the west who preached fellowship yet warred as much

as the Praesi. Brandon was not so old as to grow desperate, not yet, and so he had looked to the lay of the kingdom and made his choice. Better a tyrant born of Callow than the Empress' own leash at their throat. And he'd been right, he knew that now. Already so many of the Fifteenth were Callowans, and the further Queen Catherine broke with the Tower the more she would grow to rely on her own people. Not rebellion, no, not in the Grandmaster's day. But there *would* be a day. Where Callow would be kingdom in truth even if the Wasteland denied it the name. Where a great and fierce army having learned from the victors of the Conquest would give the Tower pause should it seek to overstep again.

He would play the long game, and win.

But for that scheme to bear fruit, Brandon mused, he first had to survive this day. The Order had sallied out at the order of that scowling orc general, the one they called the Hellhound, and at first the Talbot had thought it foolishness. A young girl's blunder, for General Juniper was said to have seen barely twenty summers. The Grandmaster had once been heir to Marchford and Elizabeth Talbot, once held to be the greatest commander of the Kingdom of Callow when that name was more than a dream. He had fought in no wars before the Arcadian Campaign but he had been taught strategy and war-making, to lead men in battle as his forbears had for centuries. He'd thought it best to have his knights stay at the flank of the legionaries, ready to swoop on the enemy when they engaged the infantry. Yet the Hellhound had oddly staggered her foot and sent him out into the wilderness to await signal for a charge. It had seemed an ever-worsening blunder as he obeyed and impotently watched the devils spill out from the gate and spread along the length of this oblique formation of the general's. Oblique. That had been the word that led him to understand.

His aunt had once spoken it to him when he'd been a boy, in her solar at Talbot Manor as she sat him in a chair and placed iron figurines on a drawn map. The Fields of Streges, she'd been showing him. It would have been a lie to call them the first ones, for that stretch of field had seen a hundred battles between Callow and Praes, but the battle she showed him had been the one before the Carrion's Lord massacre on that plain. When Dread Emperor Nefarious, fresh to his throne and cocksure of his might, had attempted an invasion. Good King Robert had met the old legions and their hordes of greenskin auxiliaries on flat grounds, and staggered his advance much like this. Even as the Wizard of the West fought the Emperor, the Black Knight of those days had ordered greenskins to pour down the staggered side and sweep it aside. It'd been a bloodbath, though not the one the Wastelanders wished for. And now Brandon stood in the place of the old knightly orders, under banner of bronze and black, ready to unleash death at the end of a thousand lances.

The stage General Juniper had crafted them went like this: at the back lay the Hellgate. From it flood of devil still poured, but that flow was slowed for lack of space. In the face of the approaching Fifteenth the dog-devils had formed ranks, at least in part. The Fifteenth was staggered in three sections. The rightmost was most ahead, followed after beat by the centre and a beat after by the left. The hellspawn stood steady before the right tip of that oblique line, but they were pouring unheeding down the left. Without line or formation, without even the semblance of orders. From where his horse stood, Brandon could see the shape of it as a long diagonal line. At the bottom of which was the Order of the Broken Bell. Before the the Hellhound ever sounded the horns, the aristocrat prepared his knights in three wedges. Three blades ready to plunge in the enemy's flank. The Grandmaster raised his lance, and within ten heartbeats all the knights had gone silent at the sight as he cantered ahead of his riders.

"Knights of Callow," he said, voice pitched and clear across the field.

*Truth's not the point of a battle-address, Brandon, Aunt Elizabeth had taught him. Put fire in the bellies for the fight ahead.*

"You all know it was Her Grace, who named us," he said.

Silence, to heighten what was to come.

"The Order of the Broken Bell," the Grandmaster said slowly, enunciating precisely. "Long have I pondered the sense of this, for our queen is a woman of few words and deep meanings."

He raised his lance high, steel tip shining bright even under this shadowed sun.

"It was no slight, my knights," he said. "It was a reminder, that in years past we *failed*. The fracture across our banner is warning, remembrance of that dark day where our weakness broke Callow."

There was murmur across the lines, but no denial. They had all been raised to the truth of this, that for all the might of the old kingdom the might of the Praesi had been greater still.

"But there is still a bell on our standard," he shouted. "We have a people still, if no kingdom. And now before you stride forth the hordes of Hell, to destroy even that."

He raised his voice.

"Knights of Callow," he said. "Will you fail them today? Or will you redeem the truth of your standard?"

Lances struck shields, a thunder crafted by the souls and hands of men. *No*, the shouts came. *Redemption in steel*, the calls went. Once, twice, thrice the horns sounded. *All knights charge*, the call old as the soul of this ancient land. Lances lowered, shields rose and horses swept across the field as the last knights of Callow went forth to meet their ancient enemy. Brandon Talbot laughed the laugh of a man who had finally found his place in the world.

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Istrid smashed the head of a boy who'd been one of her own until moments ago. One of the fucking wights ran him through, and within a heartbeat of hitting the ground dead he'd risen as one of the enemy. The rebels had pulled a new trick. Raising legion dead was no great innovation: they'd done the same half a dozen times, during the civil war. But back then it'd been a ritual, one sweep and done. Enough for the protocols to be amended with sappers watching corpse-piles, but no great worry. The orc had thought this to be the same old trick, and one wasted — her goblins had munitions breaking her dead within moments of them rising. But the ritual had not ceased. The wights had turned savage, and now every legionary they killed rose. It was grinding at her frontlines brutally, every death twice as costly. The Sixth had gotten its shit together after Black went to murder his way to an ending, consolidated the grounds and brought the sappers to bear, but now the tide was against them. If this were a raid, Istrid would have called for a retreat. But it'd been a long time since she'd gone out to kill her kind for cattle and glory, and this was a battlefield. Retreat here would mean casualties in the thousands as they tried to disengage from the undead horde.

So her men stood, fought and died.

It was worse for the others. Afolabi's legion had taken rough beatings in the Arcadian Campaign and even worse making a go at the central bastion, and the sudden turn had found them bloodied and overextended. Now they were being torn apart company by company, every break hastening the next. Sacker and her Ninth were giving pitched battle over the fields of stakes north of this mess, but no amount of sharpers would allow her boys to break through in time. The Ninth was too light on the offense, they weren't built for a hard brawl. It took off the pressure some, wights moving there to ward them off, but not enough to pull them out of this mess. The Fifth Legion, she could see even from where she stood, had it even worse than the Twelfth. Orim was retreating back to the palisades he'd taken as Marshal Ranker hurried to his aid, but she was too far and the wights were in close pursuit. How much of the Fifth would be left, by the time they had the palisades protecting them? Half, maybe less. Unlike

the Twelfth, they had no other legion to hold one of their flanks.

Istrid spat phlegm on blood-sodden ground and left the frontlines, legionaries filling the gap she'd left. She needed better vantage before making a decision, or better yet Bagram's take. Her legate would have been watching the whole time. Making her way through closely-pressed ranks took too long for her tastes, though it was no fault of her men's. The more the wights pressed around them, the tighter the shield wall became to compensate. She felt the current of it as she moved, the way ground was being lost inch by inch. The Sixth was no longer fighting forward, it was trying to hold its grounds – and *failing*.

"General," Bagram saluted when she found him, arriving blood-streaked and tired.

"Legate," she rasped. "The Twelfth. How long do they have?"

"Every legionary will be dead within an hour," he said, not mincing words. "General Afolabi's own standard went down not long ago. He may very well be dead."

Fuck, Istrid thought. She had no love for the arrogant Soninke, but commanders of his calibre didn't grown on fucking trees. There were few better generals to hold a fortress than him, and they were going to *need* men like that when Procer came knocking. She turned to watch the battlefield, and her lips tightened when she watched another of the Twelfth's companies shatter then rise howling at their comrades. The only good news, as far as she could tell, was that the godsdamned demons were gone. They'd just popped out of existence after the warlock's get let them out. The Deoraithe were marching forward to fill the void, or at least some of them. Their army was a fucking mess, the left half of the foot and and bowmen being pulled down to the Hellgate. Where her own daughter was trying to face down an entire Hell with less than ten thousand men and no help from Ranker. Gods, this had all turned into a fuckup faster than you could blink. The entire army was falling to pieces, and no one was in a position to do anything about it than her.

"I'm taking our reserves," she told her legate. "We're backing the Twelfth, then withdrawing behind the palisades."

Bagram grimaced.

"We'll be thinly spread, general," he said. "If the wights punch through our lines the enire formation will collapse – we'll have no men to plug the gap."

"We'll be surrounded on three sides if Afolabi's boys break," she growled. "Better bloody than buried."

And so she went, near a thousand with her. Heavies and regulars, sweeping through the dead at her command. Advance was slow, slower than she would have liked or the Twelfth could truly afford, but what choice did she have? If she hurried she was handing her men to the enemy as fresh fodder to spend against her own. They hammered into the wights pressing down on the other legion, buying enough time for them to retreat with a semblance of order. *Holdfast*, a cognomen earned. Even with half the Twelfth gone terror did not rule its ranks. The sorcerers guiding the undead struck back at the reverse, the horde turning on them like a pack of hounds. Her Sixth was made of sterner stuff, but the centre of the Twelfth crumpled like wet parchment when wights threw themselves over the shields and Istrid had to lead berserkers to prevent the whole formation coming down on her head. Howls filled the air as Red Rage held back the tide where Legion discipline had failed, and she screamed until the Twelfth fell back in line and the retreat was shored up. Elbowing men aside, Istrid of the Red Shields moved like flame through the ranks and hardened resistance. She was tiring, she knew, but far from done. Neither was this battle, if she had anything to say about it.

Tumbling through a knot of legionaries too slow to withdraw she slapped a man upside the head and swatted down a wight too eager for the kill with a backhand, barking order for them to pick up the pace. She'd taken wounds, she felt as the red haze ebbed low, but nothing that would kill her. More scars with stories for the telling. Yet one stung. She passed a steel-clad hand over the throb and her gauntlet came back with yellow as well as red. Istrid blinked, and twisted to look at the cut on her flank. Shallow little thing, she thought as her heartbeat slowed. Just deep enough to get the poison in. Istrid Knightsbane fell to her knees, but her last thoughts were not of her husband or daughter. Goblin steel, she rasped as the world went dark.

Goblin steel had made that cut.

## **Interlude: Liesse III**

*"Oh, woe is me, you've destroyed my army... Hahaha, you fell for it again! I haven't paid them in a year, they were about to depose me. Once more, Irritant triumphs against all odds!"*

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

Orim was dead.

Ranker had hoped otherwise even after seeing his standard go down, but now that Wekesa's boy had disappeared the demons scrying links were stable again and confirmation followed swiftly. The Fifth's mages had commanded that his senior legate was now in command. Even worse, the bloody havoc was not singular to the left flank. Istrid was gone, allegedly to sorcery, and

Afolabi had been hacked to pieces by his own dead men. It'd been a long time since the goblin had seen one of her own kind fearful, much less one of matron blood, but when Sacker had contacted her there'd been that recognizable ugly glint in the other woman's eyes. The reformed command structure of the Legions of Terror had been born of long conversations around fires she'd had with Black and Grem back in the days when they had been rebels on the run, and so Ranker knew the legions would not be taken out of the battle by the death of their generals. To blunt that old weakness of Praesi armies, who had once collapsed the moment the Black Knight or the Emperor was slain, had been one of their first reforms. Yet it would have been wilful blindness to say morale would not be butchered by the sudden deaths of old and beloved commanders.

Reputation always cut both ways.

The chain for supreme mastery of the host now ran three deep: herself, Sacker and then young Juniper. Istrid's daughter was making sweeping advance against the devils but was too far to be of true use. Sacker was on the wrong side of the battlefield, and fresh in engaging the wights through the field of stakes. After them legate seniority would be the rule of law, but Ranker trusted no career second with a battle like this. It would have to be her. Salvaging the remains of the Fifth had been her first manoeuvre, and to achieve this she had not been shy in spending the lives of the Callowan levies. They came back undead, true enough, but better guards arisen than legionaries. She was willing to trade three Callowan for every proper soldier pulled out, if not four. Some tried to run, after the first bloody clash. She had crossbows tear through the deserters, and calls made that the same fate awaited all cowards. It put spine in them, long enough for it to matter. Less than two thousand of the Fifth Legion pulled back behind the barricades, losses utterly disastrous. *A year would not be long enough to train replacements for that*, she thought. *And Procer will not even give us that much.*

The ditch that had once been meant to hinder Legion advance had now become its very line of defence, shield wall clustered tight behind it as sappers turned the thin space between ditch and palisade in a storm of munitions. The Fifth's siege engines were trained on the horde of wights, and her own hastily assembled to join them. The left flank steadied, slowly but surely, and the danger of complete and utter rout passed. For now. Legate Bagram had led the Sixth and Twelfth into similar retreat on the other flank, his giving ground made easier by the Ninth swinging at the wights from the side. The rebels in the last bastion saw opening in that, and took it. The moment the Ninth stood alone the wights turned towards it as one, to break the solitary legion, but they were not dealing with an orc. Sacker was a cunning old fox, and she'd prepared the grounds: the undead tumbled through a field of



buried munitions and razor wires with mass casualties as Sacker retreated at her own pace, long gone by the time the undead had broken through her traps. The Ninth marched down to anchor the side of the bloodied Sixth and Twelfth, and Marshal Ranker had that side's combined command officially ceded to the only general there.

They would hold long enough for the Deoraithe advancing to prop them up. cursory reading of the field would have one think that would allow their side to turn the tide, begin a counterattack backed by Daoine bowmen and fresh infantry, but the old goblin had been watching more than troops movements with her rheumy eyes. Numbers. It was always about the numbers, and if nothing changed Marshal Ranker knew this battle was lost. Casualties were starkly heavier on the side of the rebels now that the Legions had a proper position, but that moment of overextension had been too costly. They'd been weakened, and now the rebels were grinding away at them with their own dead. A Legion of Terror was a complex and carefully crafted engine, meant to serve multiple purposes and consequently involving a great many specialized parts. There was a truth underlying that Ranker had never put to ink in any of her treatises, and neither had the other two architects of the Legions: there were a series of lines in the sand that dictated the combat efficiency of a legion. Lines defined by casualties and supply expenditures. Not simple ones, as a legion was made of too many parts for that. But the two most salient points of failure were dead regulars and lack of goblin munitions. One of these lines crossed would cripple a legion. Two ended it as a fighting force.

On both flanks, the numbers were teetering dangerously closed to both red lines for most the legions on the field. Her Fourth and Sacker's Ninth were fresh in comparison, but also the most fragile of the legions: they had higher proportion of sappers and engineers, and lower proportions of heavies. There was a reason the Ninth was nigh-always paired with the Sixth, the largest heavy infantry force in the Empire. Her own legion was not quite so delicate, but it was still far from the heavy assault force she needed now. Good for holding grounds, as it currently did. But breaching the barricade anew would cost her more dead regulars than she could afford, or this entire army for that matter. Marshal Ranker's eyes studied the enemy lines, and the rate at which the dead rose. Her lips tightened. It would take until nightfall, she thought. Several hours yet. But when the sun came down, the largest army assembled by the Dread Empire in over twenty years would effectively be ended as a fighting force.

The Fifteenth, if taken from the Hellgate, could perhaps tip the balance. Wekesa had implied it could be dealt with, and so Ranker grit her teeth and sent near half the forces of Daoine to hurry that fight along. The Watch, even, though it could have been used elsewhere to great effect. It was too much like rolling the dice

for her taste, but she was short on alternatives. A miracle was what they needed. Answer came, to that unspoken prayer. A miracle of sorts. It was not great sorcery or a clever trick, a Calamity unleashed or strategy revealed at the last moment. It was a screaming fool riding a flying horse, dragging an orc by the neck as they crashed into the central bastion.

Which then exploded.

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Wekesa was unused to feeling admiration for others. It was a sentiment usually reserved for Alaya or Amadeus, whose aptitudes shone brightest in areas of no real interest to him. Dumisai of Aksum, the father of the girl currently giving them some trouble, had occasionally earned a sliver of respect for his research as well: though not ground-breaking work by any means, the man's enlightened refinement of old Wasteland rituals was often worth a second glance. But even the insights of the man who might have once contested his Name were ultimately the work of a second-rate sorcery. Dumisai was to sorcery what goblins were to engineering – a skilled craftsman, but very rarely the herald of true innovation. He improved but did not *create*. His daughter, it seemed, was of a different breed. The Warlock silently studied what appeared to be a perfectly stable Greater Breach and inclined his head in genuine respect at the other mage's achievement. This was match for any work of his that fell under the Dark Day protocol, and truthfully above most his own devices.

The core of the work was hopelessly Praesi, of course. Pure Trismegistan design, from the set of secondary stabilizing arrays to the the displacement of the energy source to the sky in order to limit the effects of the bleed on the immediate surroundings. Yet Akua Sahelian had starkly surpassed ever single preceding effort ascribed to that branch of magical theory with her magnificent use of escapements to ensure even Keter's Due did not go to waste. It was, he would concede, a masterful thing. The precision involved was mind-boggling, likely the result of years of calculations, and the sheer variety of arrays involved was worthy of praise. Liesse had runic base for flight, for planar displacement and for repeated Breach ritual use. This might be the single most variable magical weapon in the history of Praes. It would be delight and the occupation of entire decades to study her work, after the Diabolist was killed. Still, reproduction was not possible. This much he'd already determined. The Greater Breach before him was... simplistic. There'd been a binding inscribed in the heart of the Hellgate that bound any devil crossing it, along with a mild compulsion to cross for any who looked upon it, but the binding itself could only be called incomplete. To function properly, it required one with the Name of Diabolist to be the one initiating the ritual.

This city-artefact was tailored so that only one soul in all of Creation could use its full potential, the very same villain who'd built it.

In his estimation, with the right modifications part of the functionality could be maintained without Sahelian. A Greater Breach would still be possible to open, though with nowhere as large of breadth of range and precision. But the devils pouring through that Breach would be so loosely bound as to be effectively independent. At best, given six months, Warlock could ensure they were barred from a specific territory. Any modifications more extensive would require years of research and a complete redesign of all major arrays: everything was interlinked. The slightest change would unbalance every other system. It was no wonder, he thought, that Diabolist had chosen displacement as a protective measure. Devices this sophisticated had a dangerous tendency towards fragility, one of the many reasons Wekesa himself preferred to rely on imbricated forces rather than runic arrays. Amadeus and his liability of an apprentice were currently traipsing the belly of the beast, and he was glad to have impressed on his old friend the dangers of meddling with such delicate arrangements. He would know better than start breaking every array in sight, and though the girl was an ignorant thug who did not she would be reined in by her teacher's orders.

Gaze leaving the Breach, Warlock considered the soldiers fighting before it. The Fifteenth was making short work of the devils – *akalibsa*, of all things, how very provincial of Sahelian. Some things were not so easily outgrown, it seemed. The Knightsbane's daughter, by the looks of it, had arranged some sort of tactical trap and torn apart the devils with the same horsemen her mother was famous for breaking. The irony was not quite worth a chuckle, but close. Annihilation did not seem to be the intent here, curiously enough. A path of retreat had been left open to the *akalibsa* and the devils were fleeing through it, simultaneously destroying the last of their formation and preventing more devils passing through the Breach by their panicked stampede. Within moments a mass of shield-locking legionaries had the opening secured, and sappers lined up behind them. A killing field in the making, Wekesa thought. Clever girl. This was, he decided, nearly sufficient preparation for him to begin intervening. Lashing the the shapeshifted devils that dragged his chariot, the Sovereign of the Red Skies began his descent.

—

Masego had always deeply disliked when scholars spoke of sorcery as an art, for it was anything but. Mages were often compared to painters and singers, spellcrafting termed as a piece instead of the precise formulas they truly were. It was only the ignorant who found more beauty in such subjective matters than in the

perfect arithmetic of imposing one's will upon Creation. There was greater splendour in one flawlessly balanced formula than in all the statues and painting of the world. It was why Hierophant had become who he was, the reason for his love of witnessing that which was previously unknown: to fit and explain what was once a mystery within the greater frame of sorcery was the most genuine act of grace possible to one of mortal flesh. Every such truth brought into the light of day expanded the span of Creation as a whole, perhaps the only action that could ever accurately be called selfless. After all, beyond the petty squabbles of Above and Below lay a deeper truth. *We are rats in a cage, one and all, and the choice spoken of in the Book of All Things is but a trick. The true choice is this: to claw at the other rats, or seek the edge of the cage.*

Masego, like his father before him, had chosen purpose beyond the largely pointless vagaries of transient existence.

It was unfortunate in some ways that the insights he had gained following that purpose would not be used in the very kind of squabble he would rather avoid entirely, but on occasions concessions must be made for the ones we loved. Besides, he would gain much from victory today. The Sahelian artefact that allowed one to scry beyond Creation, for one, and unrestricted study of the Diabolist's own sorcerous efforts. Of course, victory had to be obtained first. This was proving more tedious than he would have liked. It was a noted fact that demons, for reasons not yet understood, did not affect each other. When two different such entities attempted to contaminate with their essence the same portion of Creation, one saturated the fabric of reality first and the other's effect simply washed over it. The phenomenon had not been studied in great depth, sadly, or rather it had but that research had not been preserved. Practitioners who kept extensive notes on matters demonic tended to be... affected by the very keeping. Their immediate surroundings as well. Even too much knowledge of such entities had its costs, and it was not false archetype to consider diabolists as particular prone to derangement. If not worse.

Still, it was quite fascinating to watch the spreading corruption of Hierophant's own creation check the efforts of the three demons that were attempting to destroy him. Like ink in water the drop of ichor he had inserted in the thread of the dimension had spread, but unlike ink had not thinned in the spreading. It had, if anything, strengthened. This had proved problematic in some ways – he now had to regularly craft a secondary control spell for his guidance and transfer the reins to it lest the corruption reach him directly – the effectiveness could not be denied. Already he had smothered Madness in a globe of corruption it was completely failing to breach in any way. There was, as far as he could tell, not so much as a single mote of bleed.

"Fascinating," Hierophant murmured, cocking his head to the side.

The Beast of Hierarchy was proving more difficult to restrain. Abandoning what could be considered 'offensive action' for its kind, it had instead replaced a law regarding space that Masego had yet to grasp. Even within this closed realm, where the boundaries and rules had been defined by his will alone, it managed to escape his sorcery effortlessly. He'd been reduced to using a defensive screen of corruption to prevent the demon of Order falling upon him, which was little different from setting fire to his own garden so thieves could not get at the cabbage. Apathy was something of a mixed bag. Though once the largest threat it was no longer, yet to consider it contained would be something of a stretch. While immobile, it was so because its essence had forged an envelope of inertness around it. Corruption could not breach it, and it kept disrupting efforts to wrap fully around its envelope. Frustrating, this. Anything less than perfect containment was no containment at all, with creatures such as these. Still, this was only preparation. The attempts at containment had been purely to sate his curiosity, the true thrust of his offensive would begin – ah, now. Sufficient corruption had been spread. Hierophant extended his hand, and from his pocket dimension a long shaft of wood fell.

A gift from Catherine, who truly could be a good and understanding friend when she tried. The old standard was long rid of any cloth but the runes were what truly mattered, carved into the old wood, and with a subtle shiver they responded to his will. The same demon of Corruption he'd once fought in Liesse came out screaming into his realm, leashed to his will. Within moments, not that time had much meaning here, it cornered the Beast of Hierarchy. With the others stationary, he could finally act. Trying to kill demon with demon would, of course, be as attempting to drown a fish. But it was not the demons he sought to affect. Corruption crept down the bindings the rebel mages placed upon their arsenal of ruin, sliding down the sympathetic links like thick oil. Masego smiled, and without ever leaving his realm found himself looking into the terrified eyes of mages hidden behind layers and layers of ward.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said.

The demons struggled and screamed. For a moment he pondered offering a pithy line to send them off with, but he did not have a knack for such matters.

"Try not to scream," he suggested. "It only makes it worse."

Corruption surged. They did not listen.

—

Juniper watched the devils scatter like rabbits before her legion and felt only visceral satisfaction at the sight. Minimal casualties. The three wedges of Callowan cavalry had struck the dog-devils like a falling hammer. Collapse complete and immediate, thousands of bodies friend and foe moving according to her will in perfect harmony. The Hellhound had never enjoyed a roll in the hay half so much as she did this single moment. It must have been the way Pickler felt, she thought, when some device she'd made worked perfectly. That instant where the cogs turned and the chord snapped and the perfect suddenly *clarity* it brought. She felt flushed and feverish, and beyond that hungry for more. Another battle, another moment where the arrow loosed by her mind found the target and hit the bullseye with that palpably pleasurable thump. Gods, she had been blessed to be born in these years of the Empire. With war after war tumbling towards her like a drunken lover, offering the bounty of one field of steel after another with open arms.

Juniper felt Aisha's stare lingering on her, and so wiped away the unseemliness on her face before the Taghreb decided to comment on it. Teasing would only detract from the glorious lightness now running through her veins, no matter whose mouth it came from. Besides, she knew Aisha had touched this feeling as well. The orc remembered the war games of the College, the bright eyes shining on Aisha Bishara's face when Wolf Company tore into the flank of some astonished company of fools with fire and sword. Her Staff Tribune saw more parchment than steel, these days, but it was inside her still. The desert tribes of the Taghreb had been raiders as famed as her own people, in the olden days before the Miezans came. The Empire liked to paint a veneer of civilization over its peoples, nowadays, but blood always ran red. No one could escape the truth of that.

"The Deoraithe," Juniper said, gathering herself together. "Report."

Aisha's face bobbed down, though not deep enough to hide the smirk on her lips.

"Lord Hierophant's removal of the demons further muddled their deployment," the Staff Tribune said. "But we have three thousand archers and the same in foot headed our way. Duchess Kegan has, reluctantly, ceded operational command over them."

"And the Watch?" Juniper gravelled.

"Marshal Ranker has granted us use of it," she replied, cheeks dimpling. "The Lord Warlock's statement that the gate could yet be ended has her... invested."

The battle's other front was too far for the Hellhound to have a good look at what was happening, but the situation did seem dire from what she could see. Both flanks had fallen back behind the

palisades and ditches they'd once taken, and the Deoraithe in the centre were rushing too slowly to fill the void left by the demons. If the Hellgate could be taken care of quickly enough, the Fifteenth could move up to reinforce the flagging legions. Swiftness was of the essence, more than ever.

"The Order of the Broken Bell is to pursue the fleeing devils," Juniper said. "Prepare fresh lines for a push into the Breach. I'll want the Watch to back them as soon as possible, too. But before that... The Warlock said he needs us to clear a space. So we'll clear him a fucking space."

General Juniper of the Fifteenth Legion bared her fangs.

"Tell Pickler her moment's come – *engines free*."

—

Senior Sapper Pickler of the High Ridge tribe hopped from one foot to the other, feeling like the young girl she'd never before been. Finally, *finally* the Hellhound had let her off the leash. All this talk of strategic surprise, of comparative advantages and blah blah blah. Gobbler be witness, the orc could prattle on like an old raider sometimes. A depression in the grounds had one of her engines bumping as the oxen tore it free and the goblin turned on the legionary driving the beast.

"You," she hissed. "If there's a single cog askew, I swear on all the Gods I will flay you piece by piece and *make you eat it*."

The goblin paled and started babbling excuses, but she cared little for his inanities. She crept to her lovely scorpion and stroked the rough wood, checking the beauty for damages. Nothing. Good. Not that she'd take back her words. Pickler was not her mother and despised all she stood for, but she was matron-blood nonetheless. Punishments as unusual as they were cruel were her birth right.

"I'm watching you," she barked at the legionary. "If you don't have any use for your eyes, you despicable little vandal, maybe Robber should have them instead."

Satisfied the ignorant masses had been sufficiently cowed, she stalked forward to the gate. Juniper was fronting heavies with sappers behind them, breaking up the devils that had begun pouring out again with sharpeners and then letting them wash up against the shield wall, but that was just a temporary arrangement. They needed to pierce through, since the Warlock apparently had some kind of scheme to close the gate. Not her concern, and she'd not asked for further information. Instead she made her way to the front and began haranguing the legionaries to prepare themselves for a parting when her precious ones arrived, which would be soon though if the oxen-drivers hurried and messed

up her engines there was going to be a rousing bout of crucifixions following shortly. And not the nice kind. She'd find the rusty nails herself, if she had to. Ten scorpions of her own design were set down as she hovered, and two of the never-before unveiled Spitters. Getting Ratface to sign off on the logistics of providing ammunition for her two latest wonders had been like pulling a bald dragon's teeth, but she'd gone above his head and arranged for the Squire to stamp her seal of approval. It had been an easy sell, given the other woman's love affair with all forms of wanton destruction.

That the half-blood Deoraithe had immediately suggested goblinfire be used as ammunition as well was one of the things that helped Pickler believe there might be worth in following her.

Ratface had later redeemed himself of his sins by using his 'talents' to ensure her childhood dream came true. Before her, delicately being set down on the ground and deployed, were the first ten built examples of the gloriously-named Pickler Model of the Imperial Artillery Templates. The Supply Tribune had managed to push the official acceptance of the design in Ater with only three separate instance of blackmail and bribery, a splendid navigation of the maze of squabbling and obstructionism that was the Imperial bureaucracy. Fast-tracking the review had not even required a murder! The Taghreb would truly have made a halfway-decent consort to a Matron, had he been born of her people. Not a breeding partner, of course, or even a first consort – those were expected to be properly demure and covered in scars – but perhaps a fourth or even third.

The scorpions she ordered set in a straight line, with some room between them, and the sappers taught to handle them eagerly began field preparations. The two Spitters were set at an interval behind, the munition carts behind them very carefully unloaded. Even with cloth-filled crates carrying them on wheels had been risky business, but if that much had not been possible the Hellhound would have never allowed them to be deployed. She had no appreciation for real engineering, their general. Pickler did not usually hold battlefield command, save in case of sieges, but in this particular instance she had left behind the general staff to personally supervise. She'd told the others it was to keep an eye on finicky machines, but that was an ugly lie. Her designs were flawless. She just wanted to seem them unveiled for the first time from up close. Sauntering ahead, the Senior Sapper gauged the wind and distance before ordering a last series of adjustments. Then she screamed for the legionaries ahead to part, and glory unfolded before her very eyes.

Ten bolts sprang forward, steel-tipped, and shattered their way through the first three ranks of stone-garbed devils. Before the killing was even over, the strings on her scorpions loosened and



with a mere pulling of the lever reset. The wooden store above the scorpion's length unclenched and another bolt dropped. *Chak*, and death flew. Lever, drop. *Chak*, and death flew. A manic grin split the goblin's face as she watched the poetry of the world in motion, the work of her mind and hands unleashed. This, she thought, was worth every strapping she'd received for stealing chalk and drawing designs on den walls. Worth every bleeding she'd suffered through for tinkering with her own hands, disgracing her line by doing man's work. It was worth her mother smilingly telling her she'd slit her throat and leave her body to the buzzards if she ever tried to return to the tribe. The Pickler Models scythed their way through the devils, until the six shots in the stores were emptied and the wooden boxes had to be changed. In that heartbeat, as the devils surged again, the Spitters fired. It pained Pickler to say it, but these were not her sole work. The engines were, of course, but not the ammunition.

Alchemy – the use of it of course, not the production as that secret would never leave the Eyries – had never been a true interest of hers. She had designed the clay projectiles, but within the concoction that awaited was Robber's own recipe. Three sappers had gone blind in the experimental process and twice that many deaf, but as she saw the Seedlings fly she thought it had been entirely worth it. Only one per Spitter, who as machines were almost more a long sling than anything resembling a scorpion. Flat but angled upwards, kept as close to the ground as possible to limit the shaking. They were not yet able to be fired from behind a shield wall, though already she was planning a second model that would remedy that weakness. The Seedlings, each half as large as trebuchet stone, arced up and then fell among the throng of devils. What ensued was sheer artistry. First an explosion, for sharpeners had been used to make much of the substance, but then spread a blinding white flame spilling from that blast. The devils screamed, screamed as the fire seared flesh and stone and cooked them alive. After seventeen heartbeats the flame went out, the longest Robber had been able to maintain the burn when exposed to open air.

When the flames winked out, the scorpions had been pushed forward five feet. The stores began their mechanical work as the Spitters were advanced five feet as well then loaded anew. And so began the push forward, heavies closing on the sides of the gate and forcing the devils into a hall where only death awaited. Senior Sapper Pickler of the High Ridge tribe cackled, and paid no attention to the weak-bellied legionaries around her that flinched at the sound.

Screams filled the air as firing resumed, and it was the song of *progress*.

## Interlude: Liesse IV

*"Rulers must exercise restraint. Every action ripples across Creation, bringing three unintended consequences for every one anticipated."*

– Extract from the personal journals of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

"Well, *I'm* not getting close to that," Archer announced.

Their arrival on the bastion had been somewhat haphazard, Hakram thought, yet the fight had managed to go sharply downhill within moments. Before they even got their bearings fully half a dozen wards had blown up and mages had begun screaming, their flesh boiling and twisting violently. The orc calmly considered the sight even as he rose to his feet, eyes moving from one roiling shape to another. This was not, he decided, sorcery. Or not just that. The effects were too varied. Some rebels were growing spores on their skin, others had bones protruding from their skin in a crown of spikes and yet more had... stranger outcomes. A woman's silk robes turned into a carapace, her the ruby set in her thick golden necklace blinking like an eye. He had seen the likes of this before, in Marchford. When a warband of young Named had picked a fight beyond their understanding, and come so very close to annihilation for that arrogance. The rest of the dots connected themselves without effort. Diabolist had surrendered the demon she'd unleashed there as part of the terms of settlement in Liesse, and the custody of it had been granted to Masego.

Adjutant felt like shivering. It was one thing, he thought, for Catherine to fight fire with oil. Quite another for Hierophant to do the same. The consequences of Masego making a mistake would be graver in many ways. It occurred to him for the first time, then, that they had perhaps learned the recklessness of the woman they followed too well. *We are no Calamities*, the orc thought. *The crucible of our forging was one of desperation, and we have learned both the best and the worst of that.* Victory against all odds, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, could never be gained without a cost. Habit had taught them to disregard that, because behind them more steady hands always swept away the mess. But those steady hands were dying now. If they did not learn to check this recklessness, it would bury them. Or worse, the orc thought as he watched the corruption take hold of the mages. In the distance a sound like a thousand sharpeners sounded and Hierophant returned to Creation in a storm of power. The orc's eyes flicked, and his face grew grim.

The Deoraithe had advanced where the demons once stood before Masego spirited them away, and now that the blind sorcerer had returned he'd come back among them. Tendrils of power washed over the heart of the bowmen, corruption spreading with them. They had

traded three great catastrophes for two lesser ones. Hakram seized serenity, let it sink through his mind and wash away doubts and fears. Clarity took the scales from his eyes, and he assessed the situation on the bastion. Corrupted mages, more than a hundred. It was no longer spreading actively, but the taint had taken them whole. Praesi household troops were hesitating, split between the duty to clear out the two Named who'd just dropped down among them and the dim realization that the mages they sought to protect might no longer be on their side. On anyone's. Could he and Archer take care of both forces alone? No, he assessed. Their intention here had been to disrupt, and Hierophant had achieved that without them. They must now contain instead, and the two of them were not enough. Without hesitation, he made his decision.

"Who is in command among you?" he called out to the soldiers.

"Shut your fucking mouth, greens-"

Archer had put an arrow through the roof of the woman's mouth before she was done speaking and was already nocking a second.

"Not the answer we were looking for, my darlings," she smiled.

"Your sorcerers are corrupted," Hakram said. "They must be cleared out before we all die."

Power began to feel the air, so heavy he could taste it, but it was wrong. Like stagnant water.

"Listen to me," Adjutant barked, and his Name flared.

Like quill being dipped in an inkwell, void filled for purpose. It was not Speaking, not quite. He was not Catherine, able to bridge the gap of a Name too young and thin by sheer stubborn will. But he was the Adjutant, and they were soldiers. That mattered, in the eyes of Creation. They turned to him, and there was a glint in their eyes that spoke of orders awaited. Just a glint, but it would be enough.

"About turn," he ordered. "Rapid advance, watch your formation. Strike before they can start rituals."

There was heartbeat of stillness, then the world pivoted. They moved.

"Archer," he began, turning to the other Named.

"Disrupt anything big," she sighed. "I know how this goes. Gods, you take all the fun out of this. It could have been a real messy scrap but you've gone and made it all orderly."

Adjutant hefted up his axe and joined the ranks of the men he'd been about to kill mere moments ago. Sorcery lashed forward and he bared his fangs in answer.

—

Wekesa had always considered the works of goblins with fond but distinct contempt. Short-lived creatures that they were, their kind always strove to leave behind a legacy of steel and chords to pull curtain over the tragic frailty of their existence. There were occasional sparks of brilliance in the dross, but in the end even the very best of engines only ever managed to match a single trick of the many a properly trained mage had in their arsenal. It was one thing for Amadeus, who had the preoccupations of an entire empire on his shoulders, to find worth in this. Sorcerers truly worth the name were few, and even fewer were willing to have anything to do with the Legions. But for him? The toys of children were rarely worth a second glance, and those that were worth more than that tended to attract... untoward attention. Warlock was confident he could survive the carnage that would follow the reception of a third Red Letter, but the same could not be said for the Empire. Still, for all that the little engines under him were proving to have some use in clearing out the devils they should not warrant anything of the sort.

It was hard to grasp exactly what incurred the wrath of the gnomes, but they'd tolerated the existence of both scorpions and goblin munitions for centuries. Greater efficiency in the employment of both should pass without making any waves being made.

The Fifteenth did swift work of taking the creational side of the gate, and afterwards swept forward through the Breach in an orderly manner. The Warlock's chariot tumbled through the air above the advancing ranks, passing a boundary that few alive would be able to sense. The Hell that awaited him on the side had amusingly mundane scenery, by the standards of such things. Endless yellow sands spread in every direction, shifting dunes and scorching winds. The sky was deep crimson and bereft of any celestial orbs — a hint in the location of this particular Hell among the lay of them. Though his people swore by Below, when they swore at all, this was broadly mistaken. The Hells were, as much as direction could apply to them, somewhat to the left of Creation. Attempting to map them was a fool's errand, of course. Emperors and Empresses and ruined Praes dozens of times attempting to do as much, only for it to become undeniable the labyrinth of hellscapes was constantly shifting. It was a pit of writhing snakes, moving with every heartbeat. It was said that as soon as a mortal mind thought of a Hell that did not exist, it would come into being. Wekesa had never managed to conclusively prove or disprove that adage, but he *had* reliably established

that the Hells were in constant expansion. That had forced him to reconsider some theories as to the nature of Creation.

Wekesa had long suspected that the reason for the existence of angels and devils was that the Gods could not intervene directly in Creation or any of its adjacent realms. Not, like the Book of All Things stated, because a wager forbade it – but because the Gods were Creation. That their power had been made into the world all mortals inhabited and could not be withdrawn without unravelling the entire edifice. Hence the establishment of catspaws defined as opposite, but ultimately serving the same purpose: advancing the experiment. It was beautiful work, he'd thought. Well-deserving of the word divine. Yet if the Gods were invested in the making of Creation, what power fed the expansion of the Hells? The Heavens and their Choirs, after all, did not grow. But neither did they lessen, which was perhaps a hint. Angels had been slain or made to fall in the past, but no Choir had ever been measurably weakened. His current theory was that there was fixed quantity of power behind Heavens and Hells, and that Above had chosen fixed figure where Below had preferred endless mutability – at the risk of thinning the brew. Few devils could withstand even the gaze of an angel, after all.

Ah, so much to study and yet he had to settle these irritating distractions before returning to what mattered. Wekesa traced a handful of runes and a line of darkness scythed through the first few ranks of the devils clustering before the Breach, allowing the struggling legionaries to establish a solid foothold. The chariot rose into the sky again and his gaze swept to the distance. The devils here seemed endless in number, though it was not so. Still, two dozen columns slithering along the dunes like giant snakes of soldiers were trudging forward towards the Breach. Tedious, this. Warlock could have begun the work of slaughtering them, but he could not spare such expense of power if he was to build upon the work of the Sahelian girl. Crafting a lasting effect from scratch was already stretching the limits of what he was capable of doing without burning himself out. Much as he disliked the thought, he would have to rely on the Squire's men. His nose wrinkled in distaste even as he guided the chariot downwards. Wheels spun wildly against sand, splashing yellow hands around as he reined in the devil-horses, and Wekesa lightly leapt down to the ground.

Eyes sweeping from someone of high enough rank to be worth addressing, he found a woman with the markings of a Senior Tribune on her shoulders. It would do.

"You," he drawled. "I'll need a space cleared to work. A circle with a diameter of seventy feet, and add another dozen around that where your soldiery is not to step. Precision will be required."

The woman paled.

"Sir, this may take time," she said. "Resistance is proving stiff, even with your help, and the engines must--"

"I've not interest in the practicalities," Wekesa said flatly. "See it done. Now. I'll mark the boundaries visibly as a courtesy to your general, but do not expect any legionaries crossing it to survive the experience."

He truly did miss working with the likes of Ranker and Istrid. Their officers knew better than to question his orders. Warlock had no taste for grovelling, but he did believe that the occasional bout of terror would do a great deal to temper these youngbloods. As promised, he began by setting a boundary: dots of red light formed around the area he claimed for his own, legionaries hastily getting out of the way before consequences could ensue. With that dealt with, the true casting could begin. First, an outer ward. Circular, diameter of seventy-three feet. Little more than a filter to prevent the elements touching his work. Wekesa snapped his wrist and three red flames formed, burning bright, and began moving. His brow created and guided them with his mind, burning the sand to glass in the form of a perfect circle. Even as they began elaborating on that initial pattern he stepped forward into the circle and knelt in the centre, every lesser rune added as he moved leading towards him. The Warlock closed his eyes and let time ebb away. The flames wove in intricate patterns across the sand, arrays and runes he bolstered by drawing foci from his treasury dimension.

Amethysts taken from lifeless grounds first, clarity touched by death to prevent the bleed from cascading. Chalcedony from a riverbed, to nurture the currents of sorcery without them struggling against each other. Branches of still-living alder for precision, lead ripped straight from the earth to draw the impurities. Lesser reagents, but he did not dare bring materials with inherent properties into this ritual. Aspect sorcery was difficult enough to shape without additional variables being brought into the formula. How long the work took him, he did not know. But eventually his eyes opened and around him an intricate series of interlocking runic arrays marked the grounds of Hell. Wekesa looked for imperfections carefully, ignoring the sound of fighting ahead and to the sides. None he could see, and he forced himself to go over the calculations one last time. He'd done workings of a similar nature in the past, but never one exactly the same. It would suffice, he decided. Leave him all but burned out, but not so much he was unable to defend himself if needed.

"I do apologize," he murmured, words meant for the Sahelian girl who would never hear them. "It is beautiful work, truly, and to meddle with it is unseemly. But you have made yourself an obstacle."

**Imbricate**, his mind spoke, and the aspect shivered across this realm. Closing the Greater Breach was, of course, impossible. The ritual lit up around him, lights to blind all the world, and the Sovereign of the Red Skies turned his will on the span of the gate. Usurpation had even been the essence of sorcery. What could not be closed could be *redirected*. Power drained out of him at an alarming rate, but Wekesa seized that thin boundary and attached the work of his aspect to it. What had once been a Breach leading to Creation now led to another Hell, and his veins burned with the effort of weaving that addition into the heart of the Hellgate's nature. If he did any less, he was only delaying the inevitable. Panting softly, the greatest living sorcerer of the age rose to his feet. It was done. The sound of the panicking legionaries washed over him, the buzz of flies. Wekesa looked upon them, wondering at the numbers. A few hundred, a whole thousand? There were even a few Deoraithe he could see. Without the Breach at their back, the soldiers were already being surrounded. They were stranded, after all.

He was not.

Dusting off his robes, the Warlock stepped onto his chariot and set the horses to flight. He was not inclined to linger here, and it would be a long way back to Creation.

—

Ranker's people had a saying, about miracles: sudden dawns blind. It lost nearly all its nuances when translated in Lower Miezán. The usual word for dawn in goblintongue meant first-light-after-dark, but in this case the implied context was Light instead of light and raider-night for dark. Light for the the searing hatred wielded by heroes, and the meaning of strife that had been associated with the many defeats of the Legions since the subjugation of the Tribes. It was a reminder that sudden upsets always fucked goblinkind, one way or another. Like most goblin sayings, it had a completely different meaning in matrontongue. The word for sudden was narrow-vision-of-swiftness and for blind to-miss-in-wilful-ignorance. Matrons were not warned of the harsh hand of the Heavens. They were warned of seeking momentary salvation at the price of a later great cost. The old Marshal watched the Second Battle of Liesse unfold around her, and found that both meanings had grounds.

The explosion on the bastion must have been the work of the Hierophant, because that first sorcerous detonation had been followed by a shitshow of demonic corruption. There was a vicious fight going up there even as she looked, between two of the Woe and the handiwork of another. If those two hadn't been up there... She turned to Kolo, her balding and ever-nervous Senior Mage.

"You're sure the control array still stands?" she asked, for the third time.

The Soninke licked his lips and nodded.

"It's not in use, the mages are no longer guiding the wights – they must be going according to the last instructions – but it still exists," he confirmed. "They could take back control if they tried."

Burning, bloody Hells, they were lucky that demon-juice tended to turn the affected dumb if the demon wasn't around to guide them. But there was still potential disaster looming. If the corrupted mages spread that corruption down the sorcery that allowed them to control the undead... That was the kind of catastrophe that broke cities. Kingdoms, even, if it wasn't checked in time. And there was no telling if one of the rebels would wise up before they were cleared out and start pissing in the proverbial pond. And that wasn't even the worst of it.

"Scry him again," Ranker said. "Brute force it if you have to."

"Ma'am, we could have half our mage lines behind that ritual it would change nothing," Kolo said. "Trying to touch the Hierophant is... He must have something of Summer inside him, because even looking too close evaporates the entire scrying bowl."

He grimaced.

"Including the stone, ma'am," he added. "The damned *stone*."

Wekesa's only son had emerged from whatever sorcerous madness he'd been up to right in the middle of the advancing Deoraithe bowmen. That had been bad enough – at least a hundred had died just for being in the wrong place when he returned – but the poison in the wine had been the fact he'd apparently come back in the middle of a godsdamned storm of corruption. It'd splashed all over half a dozen companies. The boy had immediately started scouring the area with flame, which was the right decision to make. But it also meant he was now torching his way through the middle of the first wave troops headed to prop up the centre, killing dozens with every heartbeat. The infantry coming behind the archers had no idea he was killing only corrupted – they thought this was treachery, and now the entire front had gone to shit. Kegan was barking up about betrayal over the scrying links, and even after being told what was truly happening she was threatening to pull back her troops entirely. Ranker had told her if she did there'd be a court-martial and execution before the day was over, but there would be no putting this fruit back on the branch. Daoine was going to holler for blood after this, take it all the way up to the court if they had to. *And we lost too many men today to be able to afford a rebellion in the north.* All that, and the most dangerous question had yet to be asked.

Had the Hierophant been corrupted?



Ranker had seen him emerge in a godsdamned whirlpool of demon essence. That wasn't something she could just ignore. A Named that obviously powerful with a demon whispering in his ears was not something the Empire could afford. Or Calernia, for that fucking matter. There was a very real chance the boy would need to be put down, and *now*. But she didn't have the means to carry out that decision if she made it, and what would come of it was... Warlock would kill them all, even if they were right. Not even Black would be able to stay his hand, not when it came to family. And Foundling had made Hierophant one of her little band of roving disasters. The goblin had it on good authority the girl had lost her shit over one of her legates getting torched by the Summer Court so badly it had broken half of Old Dormer. What kind of a tantrum would she throw over losing a Named?

The only saving grace in this entire blunder of a battle was that Wekesa had come through and the Hellgate was closed. Or something like that, anyway. Her mage lines couldn't give her a straight answer, but they agreed that the way the gate had become see-through meant nothing would come out of it anymore. The troops that had gone through had yet to come back, though, and Ranker suspected they would never. She'd ordered for the Fifteenth to prop up the centre anyway and they were on the move – the sight of those legionaries marching towards her people had gone a long way in making Kegan shut up. With the wights rudderless, for now, the flanks were holding steady. This battle, the Marshal thought, could still be turned around. If they were careful and lucky and there were no great upsets. The old goblin's eyes turned to the Hierophant standing alone in a storm of flame, surrounded by charred corpses, and she wet her lips. Her Senior Mage stayed at her side in silence, knowing better than to speak.

There was a decision to be made, and Marshal Ranker made it.

## Chapter 63: Bridge

*"A dilemma is no such thing if it is flammable."*

– Dread Empress Sulphurous, the 'Technically Correct'

Liesse looked like it'd spent a few years rolling around in nightmare juice, but at least the result's old floor plan still more or less held up. I'd taken this city once before, and though this time I'd come knocking without an army at my back I still knew my way around. The new occupants, though, were something of a problem. For one they were all dead, which was not a desired quality in the inhabitants of what had been one of the most thriving cities in Callow, and the entire place had gone to Hell. Literally. Akua's idea of a garrison apparently involved a generous helping of devils let loose in the streets. Which, hey, not a problem if I stuck to the rooftops. But the devils with wings were, and the penumbra that hung over Liesse like a veil

wasn't quite enough on its own to hide me. The inevitable long periods spent huddled under whatever was available to hide allowed me to stew in anger that was growing sharper by the moment. It wasn't enough that Diabolist had slaughtered everyone within these walls, the population of the second largest city in Callow and all the refugees from the south that'd been fleeing the fae. No, she had to wreck the actual city as well.

There would be no salvaging Liesse after this. Setting aside the madwoman's little helpers currently having the run of the streets, the entire place had been turned into some fucking Praesi ritual tool. There were runes everywhere, wards I could feel buzzing when I came too close and even the lay of the streets had been fucked with. Akua or one of her minions had ordered the already messy sprawl of Liessen streets to be turned into a maze of collapsed dead-ends and barricades. This was no longer a liveable city. It might become one again eventually, but that'd take years of highly dangerous and professional work as well as what I could only qualify as a prodigious amount of money. Which, even if I did have – which I didn't, because rebuilding a twice war-torn nation and my own ravaged demesne wasn't exactly cheap work – I wouldn't be able to spare. Because, once again fuck you Akua, this little murderous tantrum was the call for every godsdamned nation on Calernia that could spare an army to march for the Red Flower Vales. At best I'd be able to put wards around this wreck of a city and forbid entrance by Imperial decree.

Every speck of coin I'd be able to spare would be going to fortifying Callow and ensuring its people didn't starve through this winter, or the seasons after that. I somehow doubted the Tenth Crusade would be over in a year. It was going to be a long and brutal slugging match between the most powerful nations on the continent, and my people were troublingly unprepared for it.

My advance was slow, but it was still an advance. The deeper I got into the city, sticking to shadows and hiding places, the thicker the patrols became. I'd half-expected Diabolist to send an army of ten thousand wights just outside the tunnel that Black and I entered the city through, but there'd been no one in sight when we did. Just a set of hidden runic arrays that my teacher promptly tore apart with his shadow before we made a run for it. That had me wary. Diabolist was of the old breed but she wasn't stupid. I kept having to repeat that, these days, but that made it no less true. Just because we'd torn apart her vanguard outside Liesse didn't mean she was done: if anything, that probably meant the heart of her plan was in here. What that plan actually was, I still couldn't tell. Sure, she'd opened a Greater Breach in the worst place possible at the worst time possible for our army. She'd followed up that disaster by tossing three demons at us, which meant both Warlock and Hierophant had their hands tied with damage control. But how long did she expect that to

last, really? At some point one of those two threats would give, and then the Named that was freed up would turn to cleaning up the remaining wights.

Black and I had come into the city ahead of the rest, but I fully expected that before too long we'd be followed by the Legions. I wouldn't even be surprised if the Watch had already begun landing at the bottom of the pit. Was that her plan, then? Forcing an engagement in a narrow tunnel that couldn't really be bypassed? Once more that might work for a while, but we had two sorcerers on par with if not outright superior to her outside and I really doubted her little get-out-of-Creation trick was impervious to the Warlock's entire bag of tricks. Right now, I couldn't see a way for her to get out of this alive. She'd last a while, there was no denying that. She'd even cost us a horrible butcher's bill before it was all said and done. But tonight or in a week, even without Black and I lifting a hand, this path led to her head on a pike. Or the Hall of Screams, if the Empress was feeling vindictive. Which meant I was missing something, because Diabolist only ever planned for defeat when it got her something she wanted and she was too fucking arrogant to care for something that sprang from her death. Akua Sahelian's cause was herself: everything else was, ultimately, expendable. It wasn't the kind of thinking that led to a woman martyring herself for some kind of philosophical point.

Not that it would succeed, anyway. Black had already made it clear that the aftermath of Second Liesse was going to be one long thorough purge of everything and everyone even remotely associated to the Truebloods. *And she has to know that*, I thought. *That she gave him the excuse he'd been waiting on for decades*. There was a way, in Diabolist's eyes, where today ended up with her on top and beyond reprisal. I was going to have to find what that way was and shove blades into it until it stopped twitching.

The first step towards that was getting eyes on the Ducal Palace, which was where Diabolist was bound to be holed up. Probably on an overly ornate throne, drinking expensive wine. I just knew her armour would be nicer than mine, too. Shame about all that blood that I was going to get all over it. I ended up on a rooftop overlooking the outside of the palace, and grimaced when I took a closer look. I'd grilled Robber after he'd infiltrated the place a few months back then Thief after she did the same a great deal more recently, and they'd not been wrong to call it a fortress. They'd both mentioned that the area in front of the outer walls was open field, with space once occupied by shops and mansions torn down and cleared out to make it even harder to approach unnoticed. That part had changed, I saw. It was now entirely filled with tight ranks of perfectly still wights in full arms and armour. How many did that make? Thousands, at least. This was easily larger than the biggest marketplace in Laure, and it could

fit that many people during festivals. Behind the walls I saw runes and stalking devils, and even clusters of mages she'd kept back.

Frontal assault wasn't looking all that feasible, but there weren't any obvious backdoors to exploit. It'd been a little too much to hope for that there would be: it wasn't like Diabolist lacked the manpower to cover ever nook and cranny. A distraction, maybe? Something loud enough she'd send men to quell the mess, making an opening for us to sneak through. *But she'll be expecting that*, I thought. *She knows we're in the city*. It might be that patience was our only real option. Waiting until the Legions made landfall and she had to shift her forces to hold them back, then going for the head of the snake. And even then, it wouldn't be a sure thing. I did hate it when my opponents were competent, it complicated everything. I waited under cover for what must have been at least half an hour, watching patrols and unmoving sentinels, but no opening ever emerged. At this rate Black would join me and I'd have no plan to suggest.

The explosion took me by surprise.

Not because there was an explosion at all – that'd pretty much been made a certainty the moment I'd sent Robber's cohort into the city through the path Thief had found me – but because it sounded wrong. It wasn't the kind of detonation that came from goblin munitions. It got worse when I quietly shifted rooftops to have a look at where the noise came from: one of the wings of the Ducal Palace was half-collapsed and smoke was trailing into the sky. *Shit*, I thought. If that was what I thought it was...

"A good plan," Diabolist said. "Or rather it was, the first time you used it."

My blade was out before she finished the first word and I twisted around only to find Akua Sahelian in all her glory leaning against the edge of the rooftop, looking down at her assembly of wights. I'd been incorrect in assuming she would put on armour. Instead she had draped over her full curves a complicated robe of red and gold with snow white silk borders. The back of her neck was covered by a low-hanging veil set with patterns of precious stones, and the oblique cut of her skirt revealed legs covered by form-fitting soft leather trousers. Even her boots, I thought, looked like they cost a year's salary. My first thought was: *well, that's twenty denarii*. My second thought was really more of a response, namely forming a spear of shadow and tossing it through her throat. It made a hole in the silhouette that glowed around the edges but almost immediately closed. An illusion. Diabolist raised an eyebrow.

"How uncouth," she chided. "As I was saying, there was some cleverness to the thought. Sending Thief after the keystone of my ritual while my eyes were on you and the Carrion Lord."

"Some cleverness," I replied flatly, keeping eye on the wights below. "How kind of you to concede that."

They weren't moving, at least not those I could see. That was little comfort, given where I was currently standing.

"Dearest Catherine," Diabolist drawled, sounding amused. "You employed this same trick to steal the very sun of Summer. Did you truly think that would go unnoticed? Of course I prepared for the eventuality."

"It was a trap," I sighed.

This entire city was, I'd known that going in, but I'd thought that my little contingencies might be snuck past her.

"Just because the keystone needed to be there once does not mean it needed to *remain* there," Akua languidly said. "Even if your little burglar survives my precautions, she will find nothing there to steal."

I frowned at her.

"So is this a back-patting session, Akua?" I asked. "Because I'm kind of busy. You know, working out the logistics of killing you."

She waved away my words airily. It really was shame I'd only be able to brutally murder her the once. I felt kind of cheated by that fact.

"I am in no hurry," she said. "You are. After all, your army is losing the battle outside quite spectacularly."

I went still. She could be lying, of course. Very likely she was. When I'd left two thirds of her mages on the field were dead, Masego had her demons imprisoned and the wights were collapsing on two fronts. Juniper was headed out to contain her Hellgate with the Warlock at her back, and so while I wouldn't consider that situation under control it should at least not be outright fucking us over for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, I'd thought since the beginning that this was going *too* well considering the amount of time she'd had to prepare her defences. There was a chance, however slight, she wasn't lying through her teeth.

"Istrid Knightsbane is dead," Diabolist said. "General Orim and General Afolabi are as well. Their legions were gutted around them, then rose in my service. The remaining commanders are hanging on by a thread, and that thread is thinning with every heartbeat. Even if they manage to retreat, this cannot be called anything but a defeat."

My fingers clenched.

"If it's true, that's a mess that's going to cost us badly," I said. "But it doesn't really matter, does it? The moment you used your ritual you made this about Named. Even if you wipe out my whole army your side collapses the moment you die."

"Can you?" Diabolist asked, and she sounded genuinely curious. "Put aside your pride and your hatred, for a moment. Do you truly believe that even if you came to stand before me, you would come out the victor of that confrontation?"

"I've killed more terrifying things than you, Akua Sahelian," I hissed.

She laughed, and gracefully arced her arm to display our surroundings.

"No," the Soninke smiled. "No you have not. I am not a fettered god you can trick or a petty tool hollowed out by the Heavens. I am heiress crowned by inheritance, in the fullness of her might. That I bother with these ramparts between us is a mere mark of respect – I could break you with a word, Catherine. You have risen too swiftly. It has made you *fragile*."

"I think I'm supposed to pity you," I said. "For being so far gone that you can't even understand what a repulsive creature you are and how it's going to get you killed. The worst part of it, Akua, is that you have all these *gifts*. You're so fucking capable, and I have had enough a need for capable people I might actually have ignored what a monster you are if you'd not proven again and again you're poison to everything you touch. But you just had to cross those lines, the ones that mean I have to put you down whatever the cost."

Diabolist sighed.

"Must you still bother with the pretence of righteousness, even at this late hour?" she said. "It has grown increasingly quite tedious."

"Is this the part where you trying telling me we're not so different?" I said. "Fuck you and the flying murder fortress you rode in on, Sahelian. I've done some nasty stuff, but you? You don't have *limits*. It's worse than a sickness of the mind, because you chose to be like this. You glorify it."

She seemed amused, and in that expression I saw a lot I'd rather I hadn't. I saw the Empress weaving plots that bound me ever tighter to her reign, I saw Black imparting a lesson that was always as brutal as it was practical. We'd both been raised in the shadows of the same monsters. It had left marks on both of

us, and the knowledge of that shared brand had bitter taste in my mouth.

"Tell me, old friend," Akua said fondly. "What *are* your principles, exactly? I keep hearing of these lines and the way I cross them yet you never elaborate. I have murdered for my ambitions, this is true. But then, so have you. Is it simply the scale of the killing that is your objection?"

"Friend? Gods, when people say your kind gets drunk in power I didn't think it was quite that literal. You've loosed devils on innocents, Akua," I said coldly. "You summon demons to make use of them in war. You're racist, backstabbing and utterly amoral. *You murdered a hundred thousand of my countrymen in cold blood to make a fucking point.*"

"Nearly all these acts have been committed by those you call allies as well," Diabolist mildly said. "Your own teacher has methodically butchered Callowans for decades to cow them. Perhaps never a hundred thousand at once, this I'll grant. But between the Conquest and the occupation? My dear, I broke a city. He broke a *nation*, and kept it so. I daresay the sum of corpses to his name is a few graveyards ahead of mine."

She stretched lazily.

"You've yourself made pacts with entities that are hostile to Creation," she continued. "And even now bear their mantle, a diabolist in frost instead of brimstone. You've consistently put Callowan lives above those of Praesi and greenskins, which indicates a certain... disregard. In matters of treachery, shall we revisit the inception of the Liesse Rebellion?"

She laughed, the sound of it rich and almost enchanting enough the urge to kill her didn't have my hand tightening into a fist.

"As for the same moral fibre you so often chide me for lacking," she said, and met my eyes calmly. "Catherine, when have you ever displayed it yourself? I was under the impression that to be righteous one needed to do more than merely commit lesser sins instead of great."

"The difference," I replied coldly, "is that killing is something I'm driven to, while it's your starting point."

"What difference is truly there," Diabolist asked, "if we both come to kill? Does hemming and hawing over bloodying your blade somehow exempt you from the nature of your actions?"

"The difference is that at some point I *stop*, Akua," I said. "I have an end. You don't. It's one massacre after another until someone puts you down. The payoff for all the ugly things done at my hands or my orders is peace. Real, lasting peace. A way out of

the loop that's fucked over both our peoples since the First Dawn. What's your payoff, Diabolist? Progressively greater atrocities, until you finally run into someone stronger than you?"

"That," Akua said smilingly, "sounds like a justification."

I flinched, because it was just true enough to cut.

"Did you ever wonder why all these renowned villains displayed such immediate fondness for you?" Diabolist said. "Or did you merely assumed you were unfathomably charming? You have always been a threat to the very order they've spent a lifetime building, even when you set out to serve their purpose."

"I'm aware I'm being used," I replied flatly. "I can live with that, so long as I'm using them as well."

The Soninke clicked her tongue against the roof her mouth disapprovingly.

"Sentiment is a blinder, Catherine," she said. "Consider the facts. From the moment you've become the Squire, Callow has been graced with one bloody reaping after another. Did you ever stop to consider this was no accident but the actual intent?"

She leaned forward.

"Did you ever consider that Callow cannot rebel if it too busy *burning*?" she said. "That the ashes of a kingdom are easier to subjugate in full than a resurgent nation under your hand?"

"I know exactly what they're after," I flatly replied.

"You 'know' what two of the most exquisitely manipulative villains alive have told you," Diabolist corrected. "Is a few scraps of affection all it takes to bind you?"

"Did you think a clever speech would be all that was needed to sway me?" I said. "I know what you are, Akua. It's what I would be, if I believed in nothing. If I thought I was the only thing that mattered on Creation."

"You will hate me," Diabolist said. "That is as it should be. But I know you as well, Catherine Foundling. And there is a truth you have flinched from looking in the eye, for it is distasteful to you: the Empress and the Carrion Lord, though you may be fond of them, have a plan for Callow. Me?"

She shrugged.

"Its existence is a matter of indifference to me, so long as tribute is paid," Akua said. "And so now I ask – is there truly a



bridge you will not burn, if it means better outcome for your people?"

Her smile was thin and sharp, a slice of ivory between red lips.

"Let us find out," she said. "We will begin, I think, by severing the ties holding you back."

She looked towards the Ducal Palace, the very picture of nonchalance.

"Do hurry, Catherine. I have the Black Knight."

My blood ran cold, even as the illusion dispersed and the undead below began to move. A reminder, those, that no matter how convincing she could be I was still mere feet away from thousands of my people she had murdered and enslaved. There were some things that could not be painted over by eloquence. The wisps of sorcery that Diabolist had left behind spun again, and even as I prepared to forcefully disrupt them a silhouette formed and my hand was stayed. Exactly one sentence was spoken to me, and then the silhouette was gone before I could so much as open my mouth. Loudly, I swallowed. My fingers clenched and then unclenched as I watched the wights beginning the climb towards me. In the distance mages wove sorcery and devils took flight, the full muster of Diabolist's madness finally taking the field. I closed my eyes, breathed out and stilled my mind. I opened them to sight of a corpse-like hand grasping the edge of the roof.

"Fall," I said, and darkness obeyed.

## Chapter 64: Solo

*"Food riots, is it? Well, I do enjoy when a problem is its own solution."*

– Dread Empress Sanguinia I, the Gourmet

It was a funny thing, hate. Before a sword through the chest set me on the path to becoming the Squire, I'd thought I was beyond it. That learning to see beyond the grudges and the anger was what set me apart from the heroes that died like flies as I grew up. I'd thought that by setting aside the hate I would be able to act with my hands unfettered, to bring lasting change instead of raging against the Tower for half a year and getting my throat slit in my sleep. It'd been a peculiar kind of arrogance, but arrogance nonetheless. None of us could ever be clear as spring water, not even Black. His brand of vainglory was just shrewder than most – because could you really call one man setting himself against the entire Heavens anything but arrogance? People could step on ants without even noticing it, no matter how clever the ant. Oh, when Named spoke to each other we didn't call it arrogance. It was will, or madness, or half a dozen other little

euphemisms that allowed us to feel slightly better about what we were doing. But that the end of the day, one truth always came out: to be Named was to believe, bone deep, that Creation should be a certain way. Beyond that it was just quibbling about the means you used to make sure it did.

It was conceit to believe I could be more than I was, some pure instrumentality of outcome or ideal. When I'd fought the greatest monsters of Arcadia, we'd called them gods. Lesser gods, of course – even in hushed whispers, deference must be afforded to the prickly holders of the penultimate thrones – but gods nonetheless. I should have understood it properly then, because what were even the most powerful of the fae but Named with the weight of millennia behind them? It was why they'd lost. Because when they'd come down to Creation, to this messy battlefield of ours, they'd been forced to fashion themselves into people. In Arcadia, they were perfect: not in the sense of flawlessness, no, but in the way that a cog in a machine fit exactly the form and purpose it was meant for. A god made to masquerade as a mortal had the fatal flaw of perfection removed from the perfect. But us Named? Oh, we were different breed. Mortals made gods, or at least clawing at the foot of that golden pedestal. Born of a fractured thing we took up those sharp edges and wielded them like blades to cut at each other. An aspect was not a reward in some arcane lottery arranged by the Gods, it was a wound. A hurt, a disappointment, a rage made into knife.

And in matters of self-mutilation I had few rivals.

So I seized my hatreds and accepted them for what they were: the foundations of my power. I'd been told once that a Name could not spring from void, but that'd been untrue. It was Roles that were shaped by the currents of Creation, left glittering and polished stones at the bottom of the riverbed. Names were something more... intimate. A collection of sharp moments before and ahead of you. Huddling hungry under covers, after the price of bread had risen. Blood in my mouth as I fought a man too large and strong to beat, defeat crawling ever closer. It was a lesson on the nature of stories, learned by burned shores. It was a faceless tribunal whose verdict I had refused. I'd tried for so long to make something of all this, to weave together a tale that did not have bile rising in my throat. But there was nothing sacred about baring your blade, nothing laudable about telling the world it must bend or break. If I disdained the lay of Creation as ordained by the Gods, the banners of black and white, then I must either make my own or find myself nothing but a butcher among butchers. And so I took those vivid moments and made them a blade, and that blade I bared once more. It could begin here, under cover of moonless night.

It would.

The darkness did not spread, it fell. There was a sky above but not one that could be touched. It was not a boundary, a ceiling. It was a pit above, a biting void of nothingness that could not be filled. In front of me the hand of the wight froze with a snapping sound and my boot came down, shattering flesh and bone. I leapt down onto the street and found myself among a host of silent statues. Stillness alone reigned as I tread forward, leather creaking softly against the frosted ground. The Diabolist had set an army before me, one a Squire could not hope to scatter. But it had been some time since I was only that, and where Catherine Foundling would have been checked the Duchess of Moonless Nights strode unimpeded. I was not truly doing any of this, I thought as I walked through the ranks and passed a wight that simply... fell apart when my cloak brushed its frame. This was not a spell, sorcery as I understood it. It was, as Masego had said, a domain. The old and merciless cold of this place was as much a part of it as the unbroken black of the sky. My own kingdom of winter and night, and in this place all but me were guests. I wondered what it said of me, that this was the shape my own soul made realm had come to take.

Nothing pleasant, I suspected.

The silhouettes and edifices were juxtaposed, I instinctively knew, not fully drawn into the domain. They had existence both inside and outside of it, and so did I. *A domain, not merely a weapon*, I mused. There was more to this than an eldritch killing blow. The gate to the Ducal Palace was closed and had once been warded. But this was Winter, the land of soft silent deaths and unending hunger. The cold devoured it all, stripping it bare until a flick of my fingers had the gates falling from the hinges and even the last wisps of sorcery died. Beyond the gate awaited men and devils, and these were not so empty as the wights. There were still specks of warmth at the heart of them, like trembling candles. An indifferent glance was enough to smother them, like pinching the wick with a thumb and a finger. I climbed the steps that paved the way to the hall even in this silent world of mine, watching wards and wights flicker out around me. There was something ahead, I could feel it. A boundary to this place that should have none. I went through stairs and galleries, treading the graveyard of my own making until ahead of me hateful warmth gleamed before my eyes. Light red and yellow, a circle slowly turning with images I could not truly see inscribed inside.

A ward, one meant to check fae. *Thresholds must already be growing difficult, yes?* Warlock's voice whispered in my ear. I let out a breath cold as the air around me and rolled my shoulder to limber it, then struck at the ward as hard as I could. Something shattered, but it was not Akua's magic. Like a broken mirror the world around me cracked and crumbled, colour and heat rushing back around me. I stood in the same hallway than before, every surface covered in ice and steaming. All things came to an

end, it seemed. Not merely the good. I was tempted to unsheath my blade and try to force my way through the ward again, now looking like an innocuous door of oak, but I was not a rat running through Akua's maze. I would not spend my strength against walls she had tailored to hold me back. Instead I closed my eyes and sharpened my senses, sinking deeper into my Name. I'd slaughtered my way into here, but I'd not been that thorough in the killing. There would be remains to find. After ten long breaths I finally heard heartbeats and footsteps, but not to the sides. There was only the silence of the grave there. Above. Threading my will into the ice covering the ceiling I thickened it, sunk its claws into the stone until it cracked. Then, without further ceremony, I crouched and leapt upwards.

Stone shattered around me and I emerged in a rain of shards, landing on a gutted carpet. There were three men in the room, and a crawling shape that was not anything of the sort. They screamed, unsurprisingly, and I noted with distant amusement that the walls and only door of the room had been covered in wards akin to the one Akua had set below.

"An amateur mistake," I told them. "Not covering every surface."

The creature of pink and bloated flesh on the ground opened a maw that was like a lizard's, if the scales had been ripped away, and a long black tongue extended. On it a triad of red eyes were set, and as they glared at me I felt lethargy seep into my frame. I let Winter flood my veins and the assault dissipated like morning mist. My sword left the scabbard and in one smooth movement spun around my hand so I could nail the devil's head to the floor. The men, Soninke all three of them, were mages. Panic remained but bled into sorcery, hasty incantations barked. A spear of purple flame sizzled to my side as I stepped around the spell, pivoting fluidly to avoid the stream of dark tar-like fluid shot by another mage. The third, to my amusement, did not even attempt a blow. He disappeared into thin air, veiled behind an illusion. I moved forward, sword carving through the fire-wielders' chest then taking him by the shoulder and spinning the dying man around so he could shield me from the shower of white sparks the other one cast. Flesh melted under them, eaten away cleanly, but that did not prevent the mage from being bowled over by his comrade's corpse when I tossed it at him. Sharpening my ears I waited for the sound of footsteps and found the last one attempting to flee by the door.

"Predictable," I chided.

I flicked my wrist and a spear of shadow tore through the illusion, going straight through the man's stomach but splashing harmlessly against the warded wall. I did not spare another glance for the corpse, instead turning to the only survivor. He managed to push the corpse I'd thrown at him to the side, only to

find the tip of my sword resting on his throat. He swallowed, the lump in his throat moving as he did.

"Mercy, High One," he croaked. "I surrender."

"I thought about it," I said. "Having one of you still breathing guide me through the mess. But there's always the risk you'll lie, you see."

"I would never," he swore.

"You won't," I agreed, and the sword point flicked down to plunge into his heart.

He twitched, gurgled and even as life began to leave him I poured Winter inside his frame. When I tore out my sword, his eyes were already blue.

"Get up," I told my newest helper. "I haven't damaged your throat, so you should be able to talk."

He rose, but said nothing. I sighed. Undead.

"Say something," I ordered.

"Something," the corpse said.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I, it had to be said, had literally asked for that.

"Tell me everything you know about the defences the Diabolist built in the palace," I ordered. "We can begin with that ward down below, and how I can get past it."

Dead men, as it turned out, did tell tales.

—

To absolutely no one's surprise, Diabolist redefined the meanings of 'overly complicated' and 'cripplingly paranoid'. The Ducal Palace was essentially a labyrinth of wards and traps that no one but her knew the full lay of. Akua was rumoured – but not confirmed – to have a metaphorical skeleton key that would let her pass through everything unharmed but her many minions had to make do with being keyed in on at most a handful of wards. My talkative corpse couldn't even get me through the one I'd failed to quite literally punch through earlier. He did know how to get past the equivalent on the second floor, but not how to go any further than that. Neither he nor his buddies had been high enough the pecking order for that. This was something of a problem, especially after I confirmed that the first contingency following the palace being attacked was every soldier within ten blocks rushing to secure it. I was going to be up in my neck in enemies if I didn't hurry, and this entire place was designed to

make hurrying more or less impossible. I'd freely admit that puzzles weren't something I particularly enjoyed, so the notion of spending a few hours being swarmed by wights while trying to figure out how Diabolist's mind worked was not high on my list of priorities.

So I'd taken another angle.

The newly-renamed First Volunteer, after being squeezed for every drop of information he knew on the palace defences, was told to guide me to the next knot of mages that were holed up. Diabolist had crafted this ridiculously complicated maze for me to run through? Fine. I could deal with that. I just needed to kill and raise mages until I had enough around to figure out the way through to her. It still took me the better part of an hour before I saw real progress. With seven dead mages trailing behind me I finally go to a window on the edge of the west wing overlooking the central courtyard. Behind it I could see the centre of the palace, where they all agreed the throne room would be. I turned towards my panoply of undead and cleared my throat.

"Should Have Ducked," I said. "That section of the palace, does it have more of the threshold wards?"

A man with most his cheek missing watched me with blue eyes.

"It does not," he replied.

I glanced at my most recent acquisitions, A Dress Is Not Armour and Surprisingly A Bleeder, who were standing impossibly still.

"Either of you ever been in there?" I probed.

I got twins shake of the head in reply. Diabolist had restricted access to that part of her lair to her inner circle, apparently, none of which I'd managed to get my hands on. I wasn't eager to enter there blind, but I'd already had to abandon one way through because the wights had caught up and it was only a matter of time before they got to here as well. Breaking the window and making my way on foot was, according to these fellows, enough for me to enter. That reeked of trap, but not one I could afford to avoidk. If Diabolist really did have Black, leaving her the time to cook up a ritual was the worst thing I could do. I'd had my Named ripped out in this very city once, and though I wasn't sure whether the alignment that had allowed that to happen still existed it was not a risk I wanted to take. I was not unaware I might not be the target this time, if she pulled that ritual again. For a moment I considered taking the dead mages with me, but just as quickly I dismissed the notion. Taking corpses in a fight with a Praesi sorcerer was just asking to get fucked with.

"You are to destroy each other with fire," I ordered. "The last remaining mage is to destroy themselves using the same."

They bowed and I raised an eyebrow. I hadn't ordered that. The longer I kept them around, the smarter they were getting. I was breaking the glass with the pommel of my sword when the first flash of fire erupted behind me, but I didn't look back. I landed in the courtyard in a crouch and wasted no time out in the open. A good thing, too. Streaks of flame immediately began to bloom above, lashing down in my direction. Stone blew up behind me as I ran and more streaks formed ahead. Best not to get hit by that, I mused. I'd probably walk away still alive, but not without some damage I could ill afford. There was servant's entrance up ahead but also two other flame arrays lighting up so I swerved to the side and went straight for the wall instead. There was sorcery in it, but it did not feel like the wards that'd blocked me. My perception wasn't sharp enough to get more than that. Name flaring, I rolled out of the way of fire that left smoking trails in the stone where I'd been a heartbeat ago and came out standing right in front of the wall. Sending the power to my fist, I swung against the stone. Triumphant I felt the stone give, but what followed was less pleasant.

The closest description I could put into words was that it was like swinging at a spinning wheel. The stone gave for a moment, but then force came back at me and blew me off my feet. Flame came down from the side and I formed a pane of ice at the last moment but the fire evaporated it and thundered through. I angled myself so that my cloak would catch the worst of it and still half my pauldron was torn off, leaving behind a smoking mess. *Fuck*, I eloquently thought as I legged it before I could be turned into a smoking crater by the next volley. I did not fancy my chances with the servant entrance, either. Even if I made it there unharmed I could not seriously believe Diabolist wouldn't cover the obvious way in. She lived in there, so there had to be a convenient path inside for her inevitable servants and attendants, but that didn't mean she had to leave it there when fighting an invasion. That left... I glanced to the side. A long way around, into what looked like a ripped up garden. Mostly open ground. I leapt away from another strike and slid across the stone, noticing as I did that the first hit was followed by another two immediately. Were the arrays focusing? Shit. Yeah, garden was out. I looked at the wall I'd failed to break and bit my lip. *All right, Catherine, what do we do when we can't go through?* I cocked my head to the side, then frowned. Well, it could hardly be worse than the garden path. Probably.

I ran back for the wall, ducking another volley by the skin of my teeth. Diabolist's ward had punched back, but only when I'd tried to go *through*. So there was a chance this would work. Also that I would die, but that came around as a possible outcome with depressing regularity. A twist of will had a handhold of ice forming on the surface. I'd seen the Watch do something similar once – wait, no, I was going about this wrong. I threw myself off the wall as fire struck the surface and, damnably, was almost

immediately spat out mere inches away from where I was. No matter. I landed on a platform of shadow and began working my way up. *Much* easier. Going upwards instead of sideways was trickier, but as it turned out a much shorter path. Four passes had me leaping through a window that had felt absent of wards and I rolled through the wood and glass shards to rise smoothly to my feet. The window had felt like an oversight. It had not been, I learned almost immediately. All the surrounding surfaces were warded, more discreetly, and behind me I heard the sound of flame lashing out through the opening.

"I can't believe I fell for that," I admitted.

Definitely should have kept going up all the way to the roof, I mused. I managed to throw myself out of the way before the array torched me, at which point the situation cheerfully continued proceeding downhill. I really should have known: Praesi never turned down the opportunity to fuck you over twice when it was on the table. Around me were the same spinning wards as outside: when the streaks of fire hit the wall, they started to ricochet wildly in every direction. Too quickly for me to avoid. I hid under my cape but the impact was still enough to smash me into the wall, which fucking smashed me back because of course it would. Then another array shot fire into the room, and at that point there was more flame than empty space in this place. I was about to reluctantly try to use an aspect to force my way out when there was another explosion. The door flew off the hinges, smacking me in the side. I took it in stride, flipping the wooden surface to reflect another streak of fire, and then from the corner of my eye I saw a green, ugly mug pop out of the door frame.

"So," Robber grinned, "about that promotion."

## Chapter 65: Elision

*"A hero should not confuse striking at Evil and doing Good, lest their Good become the act of striking."*

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

I slumped against the wall, catching my breath, and resisted the urge to deck Robber in the face. He looked like he was enjoying this way too much for it to be healthy. That'd been a close call, inside the room. At this point I was unsure whether Diabolist was actually out to kill me or not – she'd been hinting pretty heavily she wanted me to be the Black to her second-rate Malicia – but just letting me get hammered by those arrays until I was burnt pulp would have been enough to get me captured even if it didn't get me dead. Dead might be the better outcome of the two, if it came to that. Assuming it even stuck.

"How the fuck did you all get in here?" I panted.



Robber alone, I could have bought. He was tricky that way. But there was a full line skulking around the corridor. Some were wounded, I noted, and not just by blades: there were tell-tale marks of spellfire on some of their gear. They'd been in a scrap before getting here, but I'd assume not even the Special Tribune's pack of marauders had been audacious enough to assault this horror of a palace. Goblins were a blade best used in the dark or in the enemy's back. There was a reason they weren't put in shield walls.

"Special Tribune Robber, ready to report," the wretch said, sparkling with insolence.

I was going to regret this, I suspected. But at least odds were good I'd be able to sift out a few useful nuggets out of the mixture of lies and blatant exaggerations he would offer.

"Proceed," I sighed.

That he saluted with the wrong hand before beginning to speak, I thought, was likely emblematic of what was about to follow.

"So," Robber said, "we were just walking around, staying out of trouble."

"Were you," I flatly said.

"I'm a great believer in the sanctity of law and order," Robber said, putting hand over his chest.

It was, I noticed as a splitting headache dawned, over the wrong side to be covering his heart. Idly I glanced up and chalked up the lack of thunder following that audacious blasphemy as yet another sign the Gods Above were washing their hands clean of this whole mess.

"Then wights started swarming over the arrays we were supposed to blow up, which was all right," the goblin told me. "But *then* mages showed up, and the key places got locked up real tight. So then Captain Borer – that's him right there, a repeat troublemaker I've had to report him several times-"

I glanced at the side where he was pointing and found a smaller goblin, with dark green skin tinted even darker over where his eyebrows would be if his kind weren't hairless. It made it look like he was perpetually frowning. He looked pained, but also reluctant to outright contradict a superior officer.

"We should make trouble, is what Borer said," the Special Tribune blithely continued. "It's pathologic with him, I've been looking into getting him a mind healer."

"I imagine they'd take a single look at you and run screaming," I mused.

"That's racist, Boss," Robber informed me, trying to give me what I assumed to be doe eyes but ended up looking like a goblin wearing some poor doe's skin and batting his eyes through the horrifying flesh mask. "Anyway, as the qualified voice of reason I put my foot down. Was about to look for some important people to help have some falls down the stairs when we ran into Lord Black."

My eyes sharpened and I leaned forward. This was the first I'd heard of my teacher since we'd parted ways, unless you counted Diabolist boasting she'd captured him.

"He's not with you anymore?" I pressed.

"No," Captain Borer said, before I could be strung around some more.

"That's another gold star of shame for you, Captain," Robber told him with a leering grin. "I expect you to wear all twenty-three of them on your chest when we return to camp."

"You don't have to do that," I told the poor bastard. "Robber, stop fucking around. I don't have the time to spare. Where's Black?"

The goblin turned serious, or at least as much as close as he could ever get.

"He took us to visit an old friend," he replied. "General Fasili Mirembe. The Carrion Lord figured he wasn't outside with the vanguard, you see. He had to be in a room somewhere he could command from without risking his very expensive blood."

"Why target *him*?" I frowned. "Diabolist is the head of the snake. Fasili getting the axe wouldn't actually change much."

"That's exactly what Borer said," Robber baldly lied. "Only much less respectful. The Black Knight did that weird smile thing – I see where you get it from now, it was kind of uncomfortable seeing it on another face – and told us that if you want to learn how to bury a villain, the first person to hit up is always their second."

My fingers clenched.

"He was after something that Fasili would have," I said.

"Skeleton key," the goblin said. "There's only supposed to be one, but you can't stab your warchief in the back if you can't get to her."

"That's how you got in here," I deduced. "But your people look like they've fought. There was resistance?"

"There was a whole garrison of dead around him," Robber acknowledged. "We couldn't handle that much, not even going in quiet. So Lord Black made a distraction."

I closed my eyes and silently cursed. *Fucking Hells, Black*. A dangerous gamble at the darkest hour that would allow extremely important information to reach me in my moment of need? That explained why Robber had gotten here exactly when I needed him to – my teacher had effectively twisted Creation's arm into ensuring as much. At the price, it seemed, of getting overwhelmed by Akua's minions and taken prisoner. He was playing shatranj with us all and treating himself a piece like any other. I spat to the side and turned my gaze onto Robber.

"If it went down this way, you'll have gotten more than a key," I said.

That large a sacrifice would have impact. It would get me an edge of some sort.

"He told me to pass along a message," the goblin said, and this time there was no humour in his voice. "It went 'Only one strike. Make it count.'"

And there it was. The way out of the coming trap that Diabolist would have laid for me. I grit my teeth. We would have *words* about this, if he survived the day.

"How much of your cohort is left?" I asked Robber.

"A bare hundred," the Special Tribune replied. "Dug-in mages are tricky to handle."

Considering that meant half his men were gone, that was something of an understatement. I rose to my feet and rolled my shoulder. Those fire arrays had *stung*, cloak or not.

"All right," I said. "Here's what you're going to do."

I spoke, and as I did his grin got a whole lot nastier.

—

I'd been taught that, while assaulting the stronghold of a villain, there were three things to watch out for.

The first was the monster. It wasn't always a greater devil or a demon, though admittedly that was the traditional Wasteland playbook. Some entity, usually difficult to handle, would be leashed somewhere in the lair to be used as a way to beat down an enemy too powerful for the villain themselves to handle. It was

too much to hope that in this case it would be the greater devil we'd shanked before entering Liesse – that'd been a gatekeeper, and while it would have been difficult to handle on my own it wasn't the kind of brutal counterstroke that someone with Diabolist's resources would be able to keep around. I had a fight ahead of me, and it wasn't going to be a pleasant one. My advantage here was that even by villainous standards, Akua was *massively* arrogant. She wanted me for her attack dog, apparently, so she wouldn't open the game by sending whatever her monster was after me. She'd want the personal touch, at least until I backed her in a corner and those kinds of considerations went out the window. Considering I'd had to hack my way through both fae courts over the last year to varying degrees, my bet was on something related to Arcadia. I'd even had Masego and Archer send Summer after her neck a few months ago, so it made sense that I'd be made to pay for that one way or another.

The second was the trial, because there was more to killing a villain than just running them through. There was always a cost, a crucible you had to go through to earn that kill. The peasant boy that ended up slaying the dragon didn't just pick up the magic sword in a rubbish heap, he had to *bleed* first. What made a hero a hero wasn't the fancy weapon or the birth right, it was the courage. Or whatever other trite and actually fairly common quality they'd had in them all along. The shade that had once owned the sword would force a test, or the devil guarding the phylactery whisper some sweet temptation. I was of the opinion that lacking that kind of trial was why the Lone Swordsman hadn't gone out in the blaze of glory, just two stomps to the back of the neck. We'd been opposed, yes. But there'd been little personal about it except for mutual dislike. To me he'd been a means and then a liability. To him I'd been a symbol of everything he wanted to destroy. Behind that, neither of us had thought of the other as more than a stepping stone towards the real fight. Diabolist wasn't a lit sharper tossed at me by the Hashmallim, though. The higher the both of us rose, the clearer it had become that the story could only end with one of us dead or kneeling. I was partial to dead. That wouldn't come without a price.

The third was the pivot. Fight between Named were never as simple as who pulled out their aspects first or who was better with spell and sword. While an animated corpse without a single aspect and a shaky mantle, I'd been able to beat a still-fresh Heiress and Lone Swordsman in Liesse because while they went for blood I'd gone for the story. It'd felt like a complicated thing to juggle at the time, but in retrospect it'd been fairly straightforward. Here, now that we'd returned to the very city where I'd once died, there were a dazzling amount of moving parts. Black. Warlock and the Woe. The Empress. And Diabolist herself. That last thread, in my eyes, was what would make or break this day. There was a moment ahead where the weight of

Creation's attention would be on both our shoulders, and when that moment came the one of us who made the choice first was going to be the one who got to walk away. There was a lot of danger to that. Spinning that wheel with William had been one thing because the Lone Swordsman, for all his many flaws, had principles. He had lines he hesitated to cross even for a win, if only a few. Diabolist did not. Her principle, ironically enough, was the same that the Legions had chanted outside her gate. Victory mattered, everything else was dross. If I wanted to win, I had to go into that room ready to cut down something I loved.

She had Black. I did not like the forming shape of this.

My sword was already bared when I found the heart of the palace. The Dukes of Liesse had been kings, once, and their ancestral seat still looked the part. The flight of steps before me had not been built to be lightly ascended. The granite was rough, the steps too tall for more than one at a time to be climbed. What began as a broad procession grew narrow as it rose, leading to tall gates of bronze that now stood sealed. Behind them, I knew, awaited the woman I had come to kill. Sorcery permeated the air here, so thick that every movement felt like I was stirring unseen wisps. So thick I could not tell if there was an array hidden, which meant there was one. The very trap, I thought, that Black had let himself be taken to help me beat.

I took a step forward and *split*.

—

Catherine Foundling found herself tired, after a hard bout in the Pit, and slept at the Rat's Nest. She never stumbled across a man raping a girl, or what came of it.

—

Catherine Foundling bet on herself in the Pit and lost, without having meant to. Her savings thinned. She never earned enough to go to the College.

—

Catherine Foundling had watch sergeant's a hand around her throat, choking the life out of her. The man began to speak, but through his belly emerged a sword that keened.

—

My boot touched the stone. I was myself, across three lives I had never lived and one I was living. I began the climb in utter silence.

—

Catherine stood in the crowd when they hung Governor Mazus. It was vindication, sealed by the choked cries of the man that was just another Wasteland leech. But the Rat's Nest would not pay for her tuition in Ater, not anymore, so she sought Booker and made a deal. In the months that followed she no longer came on the nights where bruises were what men paid for. She earned gold with a sword in hand, catering to the howls a mob that would settle for nothing less than death. The coin she earned was drenched in blood, but blood was the trade she had chosen and she made her peace with that truth. Catherine did not know blades well, when she began, and her opponents did. She learned, but when she stood among the crowd of cadets awaiting placement in a company she had only one eye and more scars than a girl her age should have.

—

Coin was what killed the dream, not the schemes of foes she would never meet. Catherine found her savings disappearing like smoke, and Harrion telling her the Rat's Nest could no longer afford her was the final nail in the coffin. It was a bitter truth, and the bitterness seeped into her bones. The orphanage had taught her enough for a position as a tutor or tradeswoman, but the thought of it had her choking in anger. Impotence cut deepest of all. When Governor Mazus hung she was not in the crowd: her brawl with a guard that had hands prone to wandering had ended with the woman's neck snapped. Marked for the gaol, barred from the Pit by Booker, she took the offer when it came. Better the Smugglers than the Assassins or the Thieves, she decided.

—

Catherine did not believe in heroes, but she believed in debts. When two monsters cloaked in black arrived in the alley and struck at her saviour over the cooling corpses of her would-be murderers, she chose her side. They survived only by the skin of their teeth, the Lone Swordsman losing a hand to a moving shadow as a large woman turned into twisted abomination. They fled the alley, the city, the region. It was doomed, she knew. The monsters always won here. But for the first time since she'd been born Catherine Foundling breathed free air, and it was intoxicating. William learned to listen to her, after she opened the throat of the first Eye of the Empire after them. It was in Summerholm that her Name found her. *Squire*, the Heavens whispered. She knew whose death was needed to become more.

—

The War College taught Catherine her limits. She was good. Swift with a sword, clever with her mind and with a talent for the unexpected. Tiger Company fostered her skills, seeing in her lieutenant or captain in the making, and for a time she was sergeant under the cold-eyed ogre they called Hune. It was not

the already-famous Hellhound that put blood in her mouth. It was Lizard Company, Morok's brutes shattering her tenth and leaving her broken on the ground. One of the orcs stomped her wrist twice, calling her *Wallerspawn*, and it never healed properly. She never forgave their kind for that, not the wound but the blind ugly hate she glimpsed in the orc's eye. Goblins were tribe of their own, regardless of company, and the better Praesi pretended she did not exist. The worst made sport of her, and settling that with teeth on the ground made her as feared as she was alone. She had the talent to make captain, but was never elected by the others. Sergeant was the highest she ever rose at the College.

—

Catherine could afford the tuition now — and she could ten times over, because she was good with a lie and even better with a knife — but she no longer wanted to go. She'd had a glimpse of the true face of her people, beyond the well-worn stories of the Old Kingdom. Every night she rubbed elbows with murderers and thieves, not one of them Wastelander. What was there to save? Within two years there were only two above her in Liesse who belonged to the Guild of Smugglers, and only one after gold and whispers were traded. She left the title to the other, but the reins were her own. The quotas imposed by the Tower rankled, but she knew better than provoke that beast. It was the rest of the gutter she turned to, the forgotten and the ignored. The Hedge Guild folded first, after their most dangerous mage was found strung up downtown. The King of Thieves stole two shipments from Mercantis as a warning against great ambitions, so when she got her hands on him she melted down his pretty crown and poured it down his throat. The Assassins offered truce. She told them to kneel. Blood followed.

—

They killed their first Calamity the day before she turned eighteen. The Warlock was a monster, but a monster who loved his son. That was the death of him, and half Summerholm as well. The Penitent's Blade beheaded the sorcerer among the ashes of his tower and Squire mustered enough kindness to have the Apprentice's corpse left by his side for the Praesi to bury. They were growing. Thief, Bumbling Conjuror, Hunter and Bard. William found them and bound them, but it was Catherine who made a sword of them all, that wielded it against the Empire. The scent of rebellion was in the air. They ghosted across the land of her birth, followed by a thousand spies, and wherever they went governors and generals died. The Empress sent more. The Black Knight drew them into Liesse and burned the city around them but they were gone, gone through the corpse of an angel and back to haunt him soon enough. Procer sent coin and promises but both were spurned. They had sworn to see Callow free, whatever the

cost. One foreign master would not be traded for another, and as the flames burned higher and the graveyards grew full.

—

She was twenty-three when rebellion came to Callow. Long past the College, Captain Foundling had seen luck good and ill. The Fourteenth Legion, raised in the year after her graduation, had offered better opportunity to rise than the old legions already thick with veterans. But peace, oh peace was her trouble. It took three years to go from lieutenant to captain, and the tribunes above her were all young and hale. Her company was obedient and well-drilled, but loved her little. Most were Praesi, and her reputation in Ater had followed her to the camp. The droplet that tipped over the cup was that the Fourteenth never fought. It was sent to garrison Summerholm as the other Legions fought, dispersing riots and patrolling empty streets as her desperate countrymen died in droves in the south. Vindication, that the Empire could not be fought and beaten. Vindication but no hope. It had been long since Captain Foundling was last kind, not since she'd killed men for gold in the Pit, and so her conscience went untroubled when she slipped poison in her superior officer's ale.

That was the game, in the Wasteland, and if it must be played she would. She would rise whatever the cost, to her or anyone else. After that it was only a matter of patience and skill. Staff Tribune Foundling was twenty-nine, when civil war erupted, and through chaos she rose higher still.

—

The Guild of Assassins cost her a hand and a permanent limp, before they were broken over her knee. From blood-filled gutters Catherine Foundling fashioned her crown. There was only one throne in the Empire, this she knew, but come night from Harrow to Dormer her will was the writ of law. The Tolltaker they called her now, for there was no sin under Callowan sky she did not get a cut from. A woman with ink-stained hands came one morning and presented her two scrolls. One held a seal, the Tower's own. The other a list of quotas. It was not a negotiation, and neither of them pretended otherwise. She thought of that, when the heroes came and asked for a way to enter Summerholm unseen. They were going to kill the Black Knight, they promised. She smiled and said she would arrange it. The coin she got from selling their location to the Praesi was spent on a beautiful mansion in Whitestone, where the nobles of Laure still huddled and pretended relevance. After the heroes were all killed, she put it to the torch. Because she could. Because she had no reason not to. To remind the soft-bellied aristocrats living there of what fear tasted like. She watched the flames and wondered when it had all stopped mattering.

—



My boot scuffed the last step and I stood before the gate. Closed, but kept so by sorcery. It parted without a sound when I pushed and before me the throne room stretched. Tapestries hung from the rafters like columns, each an old triumph of the Empire presented in colourful cloth. The contrast to the bare stone of the floor was stark. Runes shone on the walls and balls of blue flame lit up the darkness bright as day. My gaze moved to the back, where the Diabolist awaited. Languidly sprawled on the old throne of the kings of the south, Akua Sahelian watched me with bright eyes. There was no sign of Black. She wasn't keeping him here, then.

"Swiftness, Catherine," she smiled, "has ever been your unmaking. You never learned patience."

"**Break**," I replied coldly.

The throne shattered like a cheap bauble and the wall behind it too. Diabolist fell prone, laughing, and I had no intention of allowing her to cast. Frost formed at the edge of my sword as I shot forward, granite cracking under the force.

"What your Hierophant has wrought, I claim," Akua said.

The last word reverberated. Aspect, I thought. Then it felt like a hand around my throat, and I screamed. There was a vice around me, and as my Name desperately clawed at it I found myself stumbling while Diabolist rose.

"I told you, didn't I?" the dark-skinned woman said. "That this ends with you kneeling. What I have claimed, I bind. It is *mine*."

I fought it. My knee shook and slowly began to bend, so I wrested my hand from her control and stabbed my blade into the leg. Pain flooded my mind and I embraced it.

"Kneel, Catherine Foundling," Akua Sahelian ordered. "And rise my Black Knight."

"Fuck you," I gasped. "He's-"

"Dead," Diabolist said. "He was not the kind of man easily kept prisoner. Why take the risk?"

I buckled, and one knee touched the floor.

—

Rebellion spread across Callow like a wildfire. Liesse first, but then the south rose up and wherever they went spears were dug out from fields and cellars, ploughshares hammered into swords. Old banners were dusted off, and when the knights of Callow knelt before her the whole kingdom boiled over. It was a bloodletting unlike any Catherine had ever seen. Garrisons swarmed by angry

mobs, mages killed with stones and knives and clubs. The Empress gave answer with a hard hand. The day after Summerholm was liberated, Legions surrounded the city and torched it with goblinfire. The rebellion flinched. Assassin dogged them every step, even slit Hunter's throat, and though she killed him twice with William's help he always came back. The fought the Praesi near Marchford, a pitched battle, and they would have won had some orc commander not disobeyed her general's orders and attacked instead of retreated. In the wake of the defeat madness spread. There had gone their last chance to keep any of this contained. It was no longer a war but a hundred smaller ones, and wherever they went they won but they could not be everywhere. The south held, nonetheless, and though the central burned the fight was far from lost.

Then Procer invaded, seizing the Red Flower Vales.

The Praesi had been ready for it, unlike Squire. They retreated to the ashes of Summerholm, destroying everything as they went. Fields salted, villages torched and wells fouled. If they could not have Callow, it would be as much a Wasteland as their home. The banner of the kingdom grew ragged, but still the people rallied to it. Every man and woman who could hold a sword took one up, and though the levies died by the thousands the tide was turned back. The Lone Swordsman hung seven princes and one and the Conjuror, long grown beyond the bumbling, brought down the mountains on the Vales. Shut, for good. The host marched to the ruins of Summerholm, the last foothold of Praes in the kingdom, and there the Black Knight awaited. Three days and three nights the battle went. The Hwaerte ran red with blood. But in the end Catherine Foundling rammed her sword through the back of the Black Knight's neck and from that death rose Knight as well, decked in white. The monster's bag of tricks had finally run out but oh, the cost. Callow was not a kingdom, it was a graveyard and an army. The Fields of Streges were taken back, and through those lands Callow reborn marched to reclaim the Blessed Isle. Whispers awaited them there. Dread Empress Malicia was dead, murdered in the Tower.

Dread Empress Magnificent, First of Her Name, awaited them as well. With a host the likes of which had not been seen since the days of Triumphant: demons and fortresses aflight, swarms of devils and every greenskin not buried in Callowan fields.

"Kneel," Akua Sahelian ordered, crowned in dread.

—

General Foundling had struck a deal with the devil. The Empress had been losing her grasp for years now, and High Lady Tasia Sahelian might be a viper but she was a viper on the rise. She swore the damning oaths, and over the corpse of every other senior officer in the Fourteenth rose a general. It was on the

fields of Callow she fought her part of the war. The nests of rebellion that sprang up all over the Old Kingdom when the Praesi turned their knives on each other were carefully brought into the fold of her legion, promised the settling of old grudges against the same generals that had crushed Callow in the Conquest. Even the knights came to her banner, after High Lady Tasia's mages broke the right minds and reformed them into something more flexible. One occupying legion after another shattered even as the war became a thing of horror in the Wasteland, and from that destruction General Foundling made herself a force to reckon with. The Knightsbane, drawn and quarried by Liessen chargers. General Sacker given a true red throat instead of one her legion affected. Orim the Grim, a smile carved on his lips as he bled out. Marshal Ranker burned alive, save for the black hand that was her old boast. Wherever she went, legends died.

Nearly every cadet that had gone through the College in her days was dead, either at her hand or that of Sahelian assassins. It was Grem One-Eye and his second, the one they called the Hellhound, that broke her siege of Summerholm and pushed her back in the heartlands of Callow. With but a handful of ragged legions they beat her again at Denier and smashed her one last time near Marchford. It didn't matter. The High Lords had risen one and all in the backing of a villain for the Tower, one going by the Name of Heiress. Tasia's own daughter, it was said. And if One-Eye was fighting General Foundling in Callow, he was not winning the war for Malicia in the Wasteland. Word trickled that Heiress levelled half of Ater winning a duel against the Warlock, that the Black Knight had retreated to the Steppes to raise another army with the Empress. Marshal Grem and the Hellhound retreated to Summerholm and Callow was Catherine's, finally. The Imperial governors were seized and executed, even those allied to the Sahelians, and General Foundling refused a crown but prepared for the next part of the war. It never came, the embers smothered when a Hellgate was opened in the heart of Summerholm. The last true stronghold of loyalist resistance, wiped out in a single night. Before dawn, precisely a hundred Callowans died for every governor she had killed.

A warning that did not go unheard.

Procer seized the Red Flower Vales, declaring the Tenth Crusade and forming a coalition that spanned half of Calernia. General Foundling began talks with the First Prince, but they ended when a ziggurat of stone large as Laure cast its long shadow over the very city. Dread Empress Magnificent, First of Her Name, had come to remind her of oaths taken.

"Kneel," Akua Sahelian ordered, crowned in dread.

The Praesi were at each other's throats, but what did the Tolltaker care? The quotas would not change no matter who held the Tower. But then, oh wonder of wonders, months passed and the war continued. Then the first two legions were pulled out of Callow to reinforce the Wasteland, and that was just the scent of opportunity wasn't it? Catherine Foundling had left behind the illusion that there was something remarkable about her people along with her girlhood years, but she was Callowan still. For small slights long prices, and there had been so *many* slights offered since the Conquest. The Tolltaker mustered her empire of ghosts and crooks, and began a waltz with the many devils claiming the floor. It was a long and bloody night, when every Imperial governor in the old kingdom found death knocking at their door. The nobles, feckless wastes that they were, gathered in hidden rooms and plotted a nation born anew. She had no interest in dead dreams, and so the right whispers fhad Eyes of the Empire rounding them up for treason. They were looking for her as well, of course, and the Legions with them. They found nothing, for her kingdom was not made of castles but of a hundred ugly pacts made in the dark. Those could not be besieged, could not be fought on the field.

There was blood in the water, and so the west stirred. Procer marched into the Vales, filling every nook and cranny with their dead before the Legions could be dislodged. A host of Procerans marched into the central plains, claiming that they had come to put Gaston of Liesse on his rightful throne. So the Tolltaker had him killed, right in the middle of his precious little army. She had never enjoyed anything half so much as watching sixty thousand foreigners milling about, trying to think of justification for their invasion. They spoke of liberating Callow, in the end, and as they tangled with the remaining legions Catherine found her own amusements. The pot of rebellion was already boiling, so she helped it along. Weapons from the Kingdom Below, acquired through Mercantis, reached the hands of mobs. The Assassin came for her but she set the warehouse aflame with stolen goblinfire and whatever the creature had been, it did not crawl out. She learned to live with a hole through the lung, her breath always rasping. One by one the last aristocrats of Callow found knife in the back or poison in the cup, even as knights emerged from the south and fought both Procerans and Praesi for rule of the land.

There was no great plan, no matter what her lieutenants believed. There was only the dance, and every day she lasted against the monsters was yet another victory. The rebel in the Wasteland won, though that part of Creation had come to deserve the name twice over in that making, and after claiming the Tower she moved west with all her strength. Hellgates bloomed across the land and Procer retreated back behind the Vales before calling for a crusade no one else wanted. The knights fought against the tide, valiantly, and equally valiantly they died. In the wreckage of it

all Dread Empress Magnificent, First of Her Name, came to Laure. The call came and the Tolltaker went, for someone who cared for nothing had nothing to lose. In the throne room of ancient Fairfax kings, a Praesi stood and looked down at her.

"Kneel," Akua Sahelian ordered, crowned in dread.

—

Across three lives I had never lived and one I was living, I knelt. A face as beautiful as it was terrible allowed a smile of triumph to flicker.

—

*Only one strike. Make it count.*

—

I/General Foundling/the Tolltaker/the White Knight rose, and shoved steel through her throat.

—

My boot touched the stone. I looked up to doors of bronze wide open and began the climb, humming the tune to a song I had never heard.

## Chapter 66: Refrain

*"On the third month of the year I found myself on the outskirts of the city of Okoro, and stumbled upon one of the famous Praesi field rituals. The throats of ten and three men were slit on dusty ground, and from the lifeblood spilled the earth turned from yellow to black. Granted audience with the lord presiding, I asked him the meaning of the ceremony. 'Everywhere men bleed,' he told me. 'In Praes we get the full worth of it.'"*

— Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

The Diabolist was lounging on a Callowan throne when I stepped into the hall, and wasn't that just the image of my people's lot since the Conquest? The Praesi had crawled into the country in the wake of Black's victories and claimed every seat and symbol of power, masquerading as rulers when all they'd been were thieves. Not, I thought damningly, even particularly skilful ones. I'd once thought that the Imperial governors with better reputations than Mazus reflected a certain restraint in the wave of highborn that had been appointed as petty kings over Callow. I knew better now. It'd been fear that kept them in line, fear of Malicia's deep schemes and Black's sharp sword. That'd always been the weakness of their reforms, when it came down to it. The

aristocracy of the Wasteland, the people that really held power in the Empire, had never bought into the ideologies they peddled. They only saw a knife taken to old rights and privileges, and no amount of victory would ever reach them over that. No matter. I'd put fear in them as well, if that was what it took, and forging that fear would start with Akua Sahelian's death.

She looked the same as she had in the dream, I noted, save for one detail. Around her neck hung a necklace, the centrepiece of which was a small cylinder of obsidian. My eyes lingered on it, my Name sniffing out the soul that lay within. *Trap*, I decided. She'd been clever enough so far to keep her soul out of anyone's grasp, she wouldn't risk it here and now. Likely it was meant to bait out an aspect from me, but a liar lost power when you knew them as one. The hall was empty and echoing as I strode forward, the tapestries hanging from the rafters stirred by some invisible current. The whole room was thick with sorcery, more than my senses could parse. She had prepared her grounds, and that was a mark on the right side of my earlier assumption: Diabolist intended to get her hands dirty. Maybe not with a blade – I couldn't see one on her and she wasn't wearing proper armour, but neither of those things meant much – but she intended on fighting me herself. At least in the beginning. I disliked it, that I wasn't able to tell where she'd pull her monster from. It put an itch between my shoulder blades.

Against that calibre of opponent, one mistake was all it took.

"You were forewarned," Diabolist said.

"Was I?" I drawled. "Please, do elaborate."

I could read it on her face, no matter how blank she kept it. The urge to tell me what that trap in the stairs had been, to expound on her own cleverness. I'd been struck with it a few times as well, that need to tell your opponent exactly how you'd screwed them over, but it was different in her. More intense, and not just because she ran deeper to the source of villainy than I did. It occurred to me, in that moment, how lonely a person Akua must really be. Unable to trust anyone, to do so much as offer a genuine laugh. It was no way to live. The highborn of the Wasteland were inhuman as much because of their history as because they denied themselves the basic trappings of humanity. If all you were was artifice, what was there left? But I had no pity to spare for the likes of Diabolist, and the only reason I refrained from further mockery was that her extolling her own virtues would be useful to me.

"Hypocrite," Akua chided me. "You cast disdain at my feet for the occasional exegesis, yet how many of your little... diatribes have you indulged in, since you became the Squire?"

"If I cast anything at you, Diabolist, you can rest assured it won't be the feet. Still, I don't actually know what that word means," I grinned. "You know, on account of being a mudfoot peasant."

"Monologue," she sighed. "Your fixation on your origins is unseemly, Catherine. The promise of the Tower is that anyone can rise, regardless of birth."

"See," I mused, "the way you felt the need to add *regardless* kind of defeats your point."

"Should I be ashamed of what I am?" Akua asked, amused.

"I mean, I could give you a list of reasons why but that'd take a while," I said. "It's a pretty long list. In essence, *Gods* yes."

"Barring assassination, I will live at least three decades older than a baseborn," Diabolist said. "My natural capacity for sorcery is beyond even that of your Hierophant. I know more, can accomplish more, I am *objectively* more than others. Why should I apologize for this?"

"Got not issue with the whole Wasteland breeding program," I began, then adjusted. "No, that's a lie. I think it's disturbing as Hells, but not all that worse than the usual marriage alliances everybody else does. I don't take issue with your talents, Akua. Just what you do with them."

"It was too much to hope for that the Fourfold Crossing would rid you of the attitude, I suppose," Diabolist said. "Particularly given that you cheated your way out of it. I'll admit to some curiosity as to how you accomplished that."

"Come closer," I smiled. "I can show you."

Her nose wrinkled.

"Violence," she said. "The Carrion Lord's doing, then. He does like to keep you in the dark, doesn't he?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, Black helped me out of that trap you laid for me," I deadpanned. "Treachery. Ach, what betrayal. I will never forgive him."

"It was more than a trap," Akua sharply said. "It was refinement. The clearing of impurities. Or it would have been, without his meddling. As always, he sees defeat in you where he found his own."

"Was I supposed to derive some kind of lesson from that?" I snorted. "'cause I came in ready to stab you in throat. Not much was learned there."

The mention of defeat pricked my ears, though. Black had never been shy about teaching me through examples of when he'd screwed up in the past, but it was the first time I was hearing about this Fourfold Crossing. The part I disliked the most about dealing with people like Akua was that they could read me like a book, unless I made a conscious effort not to. She found the hint of interest in me, and expanded. I let her. Usually I'd go in sword swinging to prevent her from making any preparations, but at the moment I could see both her hands I really doubted she was going to pull out anything throughout this conversation she hadn't managed to prepare while I was getting smacked around by her defences outside.

"Three months, he remained under," Diabolist said. "He might have stayed forever, had the Apprentice not pulled him out."

I was the opposite of an expert on magic, but if this wasn't High Arcana I'd eat my own toes and High Arcana did tend to operate through a kind of logic I could make sense of. Black had sent me in with a warning I'd only be able to strike once. That meant there would have been consequences, if I hadn't gone after Akua in all four lives. That this was the detail he'd warn me about told me something about how his own go at it had unfolded – he didn't tend to warn me about specific things unless it was something that'd tripped him up in the past, preferring to offer general knowledge and let me figure out my own way from it. So he'd fucked up in one of his lives. I wasn't surprised. It was a nasty kind of trap to spring on anyone, if they didn't go in knowing the key, and for all his cleverness Black had never learned how to lose. He'd won, where it mattered, when his story mattered. He would have stubbornly kept on until he got a victory out of it, even if the game was rigged and he knew it was. That was, in a way, his defining trait.

"He still alive?" I casually asked.

"For now," Akua said.

I huffed out a laugh.

"Amused, Catherine?" she probed.

"You're dead," I said. "You already were, but now? It's just a matter of how it happens."

"I warred and won against six legions and the muster of Callow," Diabolist said. "Against your collection of woes and the most dangerous of the Calamities as well, *alone* – and still you underestimate me."



I smiled viciously.

"You think I'm short-changing you," I said. "I'm not, Akua. What offends you is the lack of respect, but there's nothing about... this I can respect."

"I-"

"-lose," I interrupted. "You always lose. That's your outcome. You use methods that lead to defeat, because every time you win you make another dozen enemies fitted just for you. I just happen to be the one closest at hand."

"It only takes once, to change everything," Diabolist said.

"The refrain of every Empress before you," I said. "It's time that was buried. I have axes to grind with the new way, but the old one is in dire need of a grave. Do resist. I've been looking forward to the screaming."

The dark-skinned woman rose to her feet elegantly, brushing her shoulder.

"Well then," Akua Sahelian said, "shall we begin?"

"That's your first mistake," I said. "Thinking I'm only now beginning."

Thing was, she wasn't the only one around here who claimed an inheritance – and the way I'd come into mine was a lot more intimate than hers. Black was known for using his shadow, and while I couldn't mould mine the way he did I was not without tricks. The balls of blue flame that lit up the hall had my silhouette splayed against a tapestry and from there, out of her sight, lines of frost had spread up to the ceiling. Robber was right, I mused. Humans so rarely looked up, Praesi least of all – their Gods dwelled below. I wouldn't call what I'd crafted an array. I did not have the know-how to make one, and my power was of a different breed besides. But I'd accumulated power in four dots on the ceiling above Diabolist as she spoke, and in that moment I let them loose. Ice shot downwards in four thick pillars, headed straight for her, and the dance began.

That she would survive the first strike was a given. I'd approached the formula that was killing her with that in mind. If I couldn't get a kill – or even a grave wound – out of the first attack, what *could* I get? Tying her down. That was the most that was feasible, and so I opened the waltz with something she'd need to be stationary to deal with. That was how mages died, even Named. Lack of mobility. The whirlwind of flame that formed around her reeked of Summer, unsurprisingly, but even as it shattered the pillars of ice I kept pouring power into them. Could I win, if this fight became about reserves? On open field,

I'd say yes. But not in here, not in the seat of her power. Letting a caster dig in always led to ugliness, and she'd had months to prepare this room. Sending the Summer Court after her had been a tactical necessity but a strategic mistake, I decided. Keeping her busy had been needed. But anything that didn't kill Diabolist would be ripped apart and repurposed by her, and now she'd shrugged off my initial blow as a consequence. I doubted it'd be the last time I paid for that.

I'd passed long evenings with Masego, preparing for this fight. Discussing not the theory of sorcery but the practicalities of using it, the limits. The conclusion I'd arrived to was that if I wanted to win, I had to do so within the first ten exchanges. Any longer than that, and her bag of devilries would outshine mine. I'd be stuck on the defensive, and that was the beginning of the crawl to defeat. One exchange had passed. My cloak fluttered behind me as I ran, ten steps passing before she recognized the danger of it. The whirlwind of fire thickened then blew up, forcing back the ice for a precious single heartbeat, and among the pillar of flame was revealed to be nothing at all. Second exchange: she was buying distance, with an illusion. A year ago, that would have been a problem but I had ways to deal with that, now. And the power to spare to use them. My foot stomped against the ground and ice spread from the touch, spreading like a tide. I wasn't much, not even enough to slip on. But it spread quickly and the silhouette of two boots was revealed.

"There you are," I said.

Diabolist dismissed her illusion and reappeared with runes hovering in the air before her. High Arcana. Third exchange then. Now she would attempt to hobble me, knowing if she didn't my sword would find her throat. Lightning spun, first a bolt but then weaving itself into a cage. I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. Her lack of experience fighting against Named was showing – it would have been good against a mortal, but not the likes of me. My body convulsed in pain as I forced my way through the crackling tendrils, but my body was a vessel to my will. I had will enough that pain was just discomfort, something that could be set aside as a distraction if necessity called for it. I was on her within three heartbeats, my own ice no hindrance to me at all. Her wrist snapped, rings of darkness forming around it as the shape of a sword was forged in black. The stance she fell into before I struck was one I recognized. There were half a dozen schools of Soninke swordsmanship and this one I recognized on sight. *Koanguka Moko*, the Hand-in-Falling. Best used for duelling. I knew how to pick out the weaknesses of that form, how to bait it into a killing stroke, but that was playing her game. Giving her the time to cast again.

*You were taught this, I thought. As a child, when your mother decided you must have the skill of a duellist to settle the*

*affairs of the blade between Named.* But this wasn't a duel, and I wasn't a swordswoman. So when her sword came up perfectly angled to have mine glance off I didn't fight it – instead I punched her in the belly, and the fourth exchange began. I'd struck hard enough to wreck steel, to powder stone. I would have pulped a legionary with that blow. Akua was blown off her feet by it, but a subtle ripple shivered across her robes and there was no gratifying feel of guts and bone giving under my hand. I let the world slow around me as I sunk into my Name, the sight of Diabolist flying into one of her banners burning itself into my eyes. If I made a mistake here, all the momentum I'd accumulated was gone. It would be hard to recover from that. I needed... I needed to interrupt that rune she was forming and control where she landed, at the same time. My eyes flecked to the tapestry and my hand followed, dark ice forming on the contraption of metal keeping it hung from the rafters and shattering it. When Akua hit the tapestry it folded under her but I got a glimpse of her face, of the small quirk of the lips that betrayed triumph. Trade, I decided, gritting my teeth. The Summer flame hit my shoulder even as I swept the edges of the tapestry, biting down on a scream as I wrapped Diabolist in a very expensive sack and pivoted to smash her into the ground.

The fifth exchange began with me trying and failing to put out the fire burning into my side. I forced Winter into it but Winter always lost, when fighting Summer. I could, if I took a moment, sharpen my will and drown it out. But it would take time I did not have, and this wasn't my sword arm. I'd wait until I was in danger of losing the arm. Diabolist spoke in the mage tongue, flailing on the ground, and though the words were alien to me the feel of the spell was not. She'd used something similar the last time we fought in Liesse. Even as the floor beneath me roiled with sorcery I leapt, boots landing sideways on a platform of shade as the ground turned to liquid save for a circle around her. I leapt off and came upon her just as she forced aside the tapestry over her, sword point crisp and clear. I rammed it into her chest, an inch away to the left of her heart. Angle would've been awkward otherwise, and given her protections I wasn't taking the risk of it glancing off entirely. Akua's lips thinned with pain and she lay her hand on my good shoulder even as I twisted the blade to worsen the wound. Too late for me to the dodge, I assessed.

The force that came from her hand blew me off my feet, but I took it in stride. I had, after all, won two victories going into the sixth exchange. The first was that she'd had to dismiss her liquefying spell to cast this one. The second was that, while she rose to her feet and healed her wound with a pale face, I rose to mine and finally had the time to smother the Summer flame without losing the tempo. My shoulder was a ruin of melted steel and burnt flesh, but the cold ended the distraction of the pain and I'd fought through worse in the past. I could almost run my

finger along the length of the coming four exchanges, as if they were written in the air, and what I saw there had me smiling. She would notice it soon enough. The moment she reached for one of her arrays and found nothing, she was clever enough she'd put it together. Why I'd encouraged her to keep talking, why I'd not tried to take the fight out of a room she'd carefully crafted into her sanctum. It would have been more madness than gambit, if not for one single thing: just because I'd never used that trick in a fight didn't mean I *couldn't*.

The seventh exchange began when I shot forward. She'd learned from our earlier bout, and this time she didn't go for lightning. Panes of red light formed behind me, four of them, and when I struck at the one before me the other span and smacked me to the side. I slid across stone and found another set before me when I tried to turn. Ah. Problematic. Unless. I formed a spear of ice and tossed it at the first set, getting it spinning, and carefully adjusted my angle running into the one before me. It jostled my bad arm painfully even through the cold when I was thrown, right into the first set – and from there straight at Diabolist, whose face was amusingly flabbergasted.

I crouched low, sword swinging upwards, and that was the eight exchange opening. The black sword formed again to parry my blade, but she was a second-rate swordswoman at best: I spun on myself, breaking her footing, and even as she fell I flipped my sword and the pommel came down on her pretty white teeth with a deeply satisfying shattering sound. There was nothing graceful or elegant about this: I rolled over her and sat on her body, punching hard enough her sorcerous shield shivered once more and the ground cracked beneath her. She'd had to have felt that, enchantment or not. Threads of light bloomed behind her, tying around her body and ripping her out from under me. I got up to my feet before she could, though the threads hoisted up her a heartbeat later.

The ninth exchange happened when she flicked her wrist at me and nothing happened at all. Her face went blank. I began gathering power into myself, shaping it. Behind us, slowly, the bronze gates collapsed. They were burning green.

"You set fire to your own path of retreat," Diabolist said, sorcery flaring around her as her teeth healed.

"Wrong again," I replied. "I set fire to *everything*."

In one of those little quirks of Creation, an entire pane of the wall to our side collapsed the moment I finished speaking. Behind it lay a hellscape of goblinfire unleashed. Robber hadn't skipped on the stuff, I noted. I wouldn't be surprised if this entire section of the palace was melted stone by the time the fire went out.

"Is this the sum of you, Catherine Foundling?" Akua said. "Were you so disbelieving of victory you decided to burn us both?"

"Do you ever get tired?" I smiled rudely. "You know, of being wrong all the time."

For the tenth exchange, I opened a gate into Arcadia and stepped through it.

## Chapter 67: Middle Eight

*"Change, my friend, is the admission that one falls short of perfection. A plebeian sort of doubt, best reserved for rulers who don't make their enemies eat their own hands."*

– Dread Emperor Revenant

I'd picked my battlefield to stack the game as much in my favour as she had in hers when I'd engaged in the throne room. Much as it irritated me to admit it, there was no real chance my little fire snare would actually kill Diabolist: it was a death trap I hadn't seen through to the end. Even between villains, there was only one way that kind of play could end. That was fine, since the point hadn't been to put her down. Gods, I wish it could be that easy. What I'd accomplished was put the hurt on her before putting the torch to whatever nasty surprises she'd prepared just for me. It'd always been made abundantly clear to me that taking a swing at a well prepared mage was a Bad Idea, and I'd venture that warning counted twice as much if the mage in question was Named. Here, though? We were on *my* chosen grounds. And when the time came to make that choice, I'd picked somewhere I had spilled blood before: the Fields of Wend. I honestly couldn't think of a better place to kill Akua than a mile-wide stretch of shifting and uneven glaciers in the heart of what had once been Winter.

I'd come out on the edge of the glacier the fae called the Wending Heart, the tallest of them all and topped by a perfectly round platform, and moved away swiftly. Had I mouthed off at the Duke of Violent Squalls here once? It felt like I had. Admittedly when it came to assumptions about my diplomatic proceedings 'gave insult' tended to be the right bet. The only downside I could figure was that there might be fae interested in our little scrap who came calling, but even when it came to that I had the advantage. I was still a titled Duchess, and earlier Akua had been throwing around Summer flame. Exactly how it had all come together after the wedding between the King and Queen of Arcadia was still a mystery to me, but I assumed using what could only be violently stolen power wouldn't exactly please that crowd. And, unlike me, she had no oath from the royals to guarantee her safety. This was as much as I'd be able to tilt the balance my way before it came to a head, short of having the Woe at my back.

I left the fairy gate wide open. Getting Diabolist here was half the point of this in the first place, and besides I wasn't going to bet on my being better at manipulating that power than her if I tried to close it and she tried to keep it open. Call me sentimental, but if hubris had to get me killed I'd at least require a kind not quite so blatant. Akua strolled through indifferently, casting a look of mild curiosity around her.

"Ah, Catherine," she laughed throatily. "Your particular mixture of cleverness and ignorance never ceases to injure, does it?"

I studied her carefully. She was moving too slowly. Taking in her surroundings but not really assessing them the way she had earlier – she wasn't finding good space to stand or noting places to avoid. That meant her attention was elsewhere. I sharpened my senses, but all I could hear was the loud rumble of glaciers smashing into each other. If there were fae, I thought, I should be able to at least make out the edges of their presence. What was she looking for, then? Whatever it was, I suspected letting her have it would lead to no good. With a twist of will, I closed the gate.

"**Claim,**" Diabolist said, tone casual, and ownership of it was ripped from me.

All that remained was a hole in the air too small to even crawl through, but she'd just thrown away an aspect on taking it. I swallowed a breath. It looked like I had a problem on my hands: Akua never did anything without at least three reasons. I let Winter flood my veins and found it still answered unhindered to my will. Then what – no, that was the wrong way to go about this. I was getting sucked into her tempo, and the moment that happened I was done for. It was nearly always better to disrupt than to respond. I charged forward. The sooner I got the both of us off this platform the better.

"The courtesy is late in the giving," Akua said, "but must be afforded nonetheless."

I got within three feet of her before the entire Heart spun, and that threw me off my stride long enough for a streak of darkness to strike at my chest and send me sliding back. The tendril of black remained around Diabolist, coiled like a loyal and eager snake. How the fuck had she done that? The spinning, not the pale imitation of my teacher's trick. This was a fae place of power, she should have no sway here.

"Thank you, Catherine Foundling, for the valuable lessons you taught me in Liesse," Diabolist said.

I wasted no breath on a reply, but my blood ran cold. This was an echo to words I'd spoke to her at the Blessed Isle, once, and to Barika Unonti right before I put a crossbow bolt into her eye.

Not something to be lightly spoken. Akua was beginning a monologue, though, and that was my chance. I was warier in my approach the second time. I tested her defences with a flick of my blade and when the tendril of darkness struck out I bent under it and stepped behind her guard. My blade whistled as I carved through her throat but *fuck*, I'd lost the tempo and she was one step ahead of me – all I cut was a shade, an illusion, and Akua shivered back into sight at the opposite edge of the Heart. I pivoted without hesitation and returned on the offensive.

"On that night where you broke my bones," the dark-skinned woman said. "The two of us began a conversation about power that went unfinished. Shall we resume it?"

I breathed out and sought calm. Splashing around like a fool trying to catch a fish barehanded wasn't going to get my anywhere. Method was how I turned this around. First, finding out if what I saw was real. I touched Winter, the howling desolation made even thicker here in the very place where I had earned my mantle, and ice formed around Diabolist's feet. She did not even spare it a glance before it began melting, but it was confirmation. I moved then, quick as wink.

"There are weaknesses to my ways," the villain acknowledged. "Repeated conflict with you has made this clear. But you seem under the impression that means they are without worth. A dangerous assumption."

I expected the blow to come the moment I was within a foot of coming in striking range, and she did not disappoint. I only caught sight of the thin transparent wedges that cut silently through the air by sharpening my eyes, and though that allowed me to avoid them it also cost me. A ball of dazzling lights formed in front of my face and erupted instantly, searing a dozen colours into my vision. I struck blindly at where she'd been but my sword bounced off something solid and something else caught my ankle and tossed me away. Even as I fell on back in the ice and rolled, I grit my teeth. She was toying with me. She could have done some real damage right then, if she'd been so inclined.

"I've told you this before: a Name is not a mere tool," Akua said. "It has *meaning*. It is the choosing of a side, of a Role. To borrow its power while denying the Role is to willingly cripple yourself."

Even as I considered a different angle of attack, a part of me wondered if this might be the wrong way to go about it. She'd never had such an easy time handling me before, which smelled of a pattern or trick I didn't know. Talking so much should have seen me put a sword in her throat by now. *Unless it's not the right moment*, I frowned. Was Creation, even here, putting a finger on the scales until it had received proper theatrics? It wouldn't need to do much, I thought. Not even weaken me. Just

make Diabolist a little luckier, nudge her instincts a little. Keep her dice rolling sixes and her hand full of trumps.

"Ah," Akua said. "You begin to understand. You are only half a villain. It is not your fault, my dear. You were taught incorrectly by a man who believes power derives from methodology, from philosophy."

Should I let her keep her talking? If I got stubborn about striking a blow when it was all set against me, I might make a hard mistake and take a wound that would prevent me from actually taking advantage of the opening. If there was an opening at all, which was already an assumption. If she got to finish her speech, though, I suspected I was fucked.

"Power," Diabolist said. "That *is* our philosophy. The only philosophy. The rest we craft in the wake of seizing, in a vain attempt to justify what was never just – for justice is as much an invention as the rest, a trinket built by the hands of men."

"It's an empty world you peddle," I told her. "That's why you get stabbed at the end, Akua. No one wants to live in it but you."

"Shall I tell you a secret, Catherine?" she smiled. "The true altar before which every man and woman in the Empire kneels is not dedicated to the Gods Below. It is the Tower, that nameless god that wears ever-changing faces anointed in the blood of the last. The Empress is dead, so the Empress rules."

"Backstabbing isn't a fucking *virtue*, Diabolist," I bit out. "It's why Praes fails all the time. Why even with all its power it lost to Callow again and again for over a millennium."

"Not a virtue, no," she said. "A liturgy, worship sincerer than any pact made in the dark through ancient prayers."

"See, there's no point in having a conversation with you," I said. "Because you're not being impartial about this, it's your religion. And your religion is godsdamned poison. Even when given a real functioning alternative, you'd rather throw a tangible victory away than consider you might have been wrong."

"Ah," Diabolist smiled. "But am I?"

"It always comes back to the same thing with you, doesn't it?" I grimly said. "Until the very moment someone put a knife in you, you'll pretend just the fact you're breathing means you're right. And it's not just you. Malicia was wrong. There should have been a fucking culling, after the civil war. You can't negotiate with people who see negotiation as a sin."

"You mistake me," Akua said. "I ask if *you* truly believe I am wrong? You stand before me bearing a mantle won through theft and



murder, the old sacraments of our kind. Having assembled a host that would follow you against the Empress, having seduced into your service talents slighted by the old order. Protest all you like, the path you tread is old and well-worn."

"I'm not you," I hissed.

"No," Diabolist agreed. "You lack that purity of purpose, dulled by those who should have sharpened you. I will cure you of this, Catherine."

"I used to think there was the remains of a person in you," I said. "Something left of the child that was beaten into becoming this. But there isn't, is there? You can't even understand what affection is anymore."

I could not let myself be drawn too deeply into this. Slowly, quietly, I gathered power to myself. It would all ride on that single opening. If I managed to overpower her then, I could turn this into the kind of brawl she was utterly unfit to fight.

"Why so shy?" Akua laughed. "Use the word you truly meant. Love. And that is where they robbed you, Catherine. It is the leash they use to keep you in line. And so you stand before me a Squire instead of a Knight, expecting to win when you have no *weight*. What story carries you in this place? What Squire could possibly stand where you do?"

"I'm a little more than that," I said, and that was my one chance.

I struck. Every speck of power I'd managed to draw in, a deafening clap sounding as I filled the world with ice. Half the Heart was made a jagged thing of frost and I already I was moving. *Merciless Gods*, I thought as the ice shivered, *she can't possibly*- The strength of Winter sagged, the ice broke and along the lines I had struck thin ropes of sorcery came back to me. I struggled against them but they were like draining ditches, the power flooding through them and going nowhere. The bindings began to tighten and there was only one way out of this.

"**Break**," I said.

The ropes shattered, and in that very moment I felt Akua smile as she strode through shards of ice.

"Finally," she said. "**Bind**."

I'd felt something like this before, mere feet away from where I now stood, and the irony of it was cloying. Alone of all the things in the world, I was trapped in amber. Sweat slowly trickled down my cheek, leaving a salty trail behind, and even as the first drop fell with a soft sound on my armour I felt Winter

go still. Not all of it. Around me the glaciers still creaked and broke in their ceaseless dance, but the mantle I had claimed from the Duke of Violent Squall sat like an obedient dog who did not even dare to breathe. No, more than that. Warlock had warned me, that I was not entirely human anymore. The fae title had been woven into my Name, its domain becoming an aspect, and so when Diabolist bound Winter she bound my Name as well. I felt my mind scrabbling against a wall of glass, reaching desperately for my last aspect – which even if unsuited would do something, anything – but there was no purchase. I no longer ruled my Name, my mantle or even my own body. I was appalled, then, at the arrogance I'd had in trying to kill this woman with the very instrument she could use to crush me. Akua slowly circled around me, her long dark hair made shining by melted frost.

"It would have been a fight," she said. "If you were not merely dwelling in the penumbra of villainy instead of embracing your better nature. A Black Knight anointed the last of Winter would have been... difficult to call to heel. I would have preferred it, nonetheless. They cheated the both of us our true iron."

Instead all she'd had to do was talk, and bait out my only aspect that might feasibly break her hold. For all that Diabolist had pretended to be absorbed in her words, she'd had me dancing to her tune since the moment she stepped into Arcadia. Akua's hand strayed to my face and she wiped away the sweat almost tenderly. It felt like a violation, however fleeting the touch, and one made even worse by the pretence of warmth.

"You will never like me," she told me. "But you will learn to love me, eventually. We will do great things, you and I. As we were always meant to."

She smiled, like a young girl sharing a secret with another in the dark.

"It is petty, but I am glad you have Deoraithe blood. Even if only in part," she confided. "They are a greater kind than the rest of Callowans. Nearly Praesi in their settling of grudges."

I was not a person in her eyes, I realized. Just cattle to be inspected for good teeth and lustrous coat. I'd ceased being someone to her, if I'd ever been, the moment she decided she had a use for me. Her hand withdrew from my face, instead adjusting my cloak around my neck.

"The throne room would have seen you lose as well," she mused. "But here? Oh, the mistake that was. *Diabolist*, dearest. Strange vistas such as these are not foreign to me. You took us to a place of usurpation and murder, and though you have learned of those ways you are yet young to that learning and came late to it besides."

Her lips quirked and she stepped away.

"You will already be thinking of ways to cross me," she said. "So let me disabuse you of that possibility."

I should have been, I thought. But I was stuck in a quagmire of my own horror, beginning to realize how badly I'd fucked up and how it might destroy everything. Even if Black somehow got me out of this, I knew what the price to that would be. There were no longer good outcomes to this. This fight was a disaster there would be no recovering from. Entire legions shattered on the eve of a great war, an entire city of Callowans lost and made to serve beyond death, and beyond all that someone was going to have to die over this. Me or Black, or – and the possibility was one that for all my previous confidence I could no longer deny – I might just lose. Completely, utterly, beyond denial. *It only takes once to change everything*, Diabolist had said earlier. I'd crawled from victory to victory these last few years, leaving burning wrecks behind me but still coming out ahead. There'd been nights where I wondered if some of those could be called victories at all, but now that I met the eyes of an actual defeat I knew the answer. I had my skin crawling, the crystal-clear understanding of exactly how fragile all I'd built was. How *one bad day* would be all it took to unmake it entirely.

"You will kill the Black Knight with your own hands, and in doing so become my second," Akua said, bringing me back to there and then. "Because there is no going back from that, you see. The Calamities will hunt you regardless of whether or not your own will guided the blow. The Empress, given the choice of keeping them or you, will choose them. And so your only salvation will lie in my service."

Would she? Would Malicia really? If it meant losing the Woe maybe not but then she might not really be losing them. Hakram would stay by my side, but Masego had been raised with Black as an uncle and Archer's teacher was his lover. Where their loyalties would lie I couldn't be sure. Thief might bail before it ever came to that, she had a history of doing it. And if one side had both Hierophant and Warlock on it, and Scribe as well? The Empress couldn't afford not to choose it, not if she was facing a rebellion from Diabolist. Spies and powerful mages would be what she needed most of all in the days to come, if Black died.

"That was always your side's conceit," Diabolist fondly said. "Thinking that being clever and quick enough, you could have the power without paying the price."

The dark-skinned woman inclined her head and without my prompting my hand rose, tearing open a portal back into Liesse. Not, I grasped, blindly aiming. Going through Arcadia was like threading a needle. And in owning both the place where the needle had first

passed and the place where it would come out, Diabolist had been able to control *exactly* where that fairy gate would lead.

"There's always a price, Catherine," Akua chided me.

She went through the portal, and I followed. Behind it Black awaited.

## Chapter 68: Coda

*"Here, have a butter knife. Let it not be said I do not tend to the needs of my beloved subjects."*

– Dread Emperor Revenant, having dinner with an enemy

It was a pretty room, for an abattoir. As usual, Diabolist had indulged in a décor that was halfway between an overly ornate brothel and a cult's secret altar. The walls were pure bas-relief of pale grey marble, and even as my body obeyed instructions not my own I caught glimpses of what they displayed. Hells, twenty-one layers of them forming progressively smaller circles centred around the pedestal in the centre of I tall. Braziers of blood-red flame cast flickering shadows that seemed to make the reliefs of the devils move just out of sight, but my attention rested squarely on the man hanging in the air. Above a raised pedestal Black was held up by golden bindings on his wrists and ankles that had him spread-eagle and incapable of moving anything but his neck, which he craned at an angle to watch us coming in.

"You're late," he told me, bluntly ignoring Akua.

Diabolist tittered amusedly. She was like a cat playing with a mouse, savouring the struggle before the inevitable kill.

"You may speak, Catherine," she said, flicking her wrist.

I licked my lips, a rush of pleasure at getting back control of even just a part of my face spoiled only by the knowledge that she could take it back at a whim.

"She bound my Name," I said. "I don't control my body."

Black had lost his helmet, at some point, and his face was bruised. His armour had been stripped as well, and that sight was foreign to me. Beyond the cuts and scrapes I knew mattered nothing to a villain as old and set in his self-image as my teacher – they would be gone soon enough, leaving not even scars – it was seeing him without the shell of steel that discomfited me. It made him look vulnerable. But his eyes were sharp as ever, and his pale green gaze turned to study Diabolist with disdain.

"Temporary enslavement, truly?" he said. "I expected better of Tasia Sahelian's daughter."

That drew blood, I saw with a smirk. There was a heartbeat of frozen fury in Akua's eyes before she schooled herself into a blank mask.

"You killed barely a tenth of the soldiers I assigned to your capture, Lord Black," Diabolist replied. "Today is a day for disappointments, it seems."

Black seemed amused, and utterly unconcerned about the fact that he was trussed up like a pig for me to slaughter. That would have given me hope if I didn't know for a fact he would behave exactly like this even if he had no last card up his sleeve.

"Arcadia was a mistake," he told me, returning to ignoring Akua. "You won a greater comparative advantage in capacity, but in Arcadia narrative matters most of all. You lacked the necessary weight to win, Catherine. In the future, consult further than Hierophant. His lack of interest in stories is a glaring weakness."

If I could frown at that, I would have. He knew for a sure I'd consulted others when planning this out: he'd been one of them.

"This is almost touching," Diabolist drawled. "Fatherly Amadeus, advising his pupil to the end. Mother made you out to be much less sentimental."

My teacher raised an eyebrow.

"Adults are talking," he told her. "We can return to your wasteful little tantrum afterwards."

"Perhaps a reminder of your current situation is in order," Akua mildly said.

Her wrist flicked and the bindings stretched out. A series of sharp pops signalled his joints had given under the pressure.

"I've had worse sparring with Sabah," he noted, face betraying not so much as a flicker of discomfort.

"It's already a cloudy day, Black," I said. "Stop trying to make it rain."

Green eyes turned to me.

"There is wisdom in moderation," he conceded.

Shit, there went my sudden hope. He'd given the correct answer to our identity key. Cloudy and rain were an inquiry, wisdom and moderation a confirmation. There shouldn't be anyone else who knew the key. I tried to look at Diabolist but found I could not, my movement restricted. As good as an assurance she'd been looking at me.

"Why so quiet, Akua?" Black said. "Come now, if there is moment to gloat now is it."

Diabolist slowly crossed the room until she stood by his side, her face remaining in a pleasant façade.

"This is not personal, Carrion Lord," she said.

"Of course it is," the pale-skinned man smiled. "You've sold your people the lie this is about the old ways and the new, but we both know otherwise. You're not a mere reactionary. I stand for the order that has been keeping you contained for decades, and through my death you gain clear skies."

"You have served Praes well," Diabolist said. "And in this final act will serve it still. You may leave the stage knowing your labour will not go to waste."

"You," Black said, "are the *incarnation* of waste. Of every destructive instinct that must be carved out or repurposed lest we ever reach old ends through old means. Your accolades are as worthless as every single thing you've ever said and done. They will pass, and be forgotten. We will all be better for it."

"Empty defiance," Akua said. "A lesser end than you deserve, but that choice was not mine to make. Ill-done nonetheless. I will spare you further disgrace."

My hand moved and unsheathed my sword, the sound of steel bared ringing too loudly in the room.

"Do you still believe it," I asked suddenly. "That it's cowardice?"

His gaze moved back to me, and what I saw there had my blood pounding against my ears. There was no fight in him.

"Proceed, child," he told Diabolist. "Play out this farce to the end."

She hesitated, in that moment. With her attention flagging I got the opportunity to watch her, and what I saw had my lips quirking. She was hesitating because she could not believe, deep down, that anyone would be unafraid of death. *Because you are*, I thought. *So very, very afraid*. Some ancient Alban king had once said that a man only began to live when he had something worthy dying for. I'd never really believed that, myself. If you really believed in something, you owed that belief that it be seen through to the bitter end. But Akua? Akua believed only in herself. She could not conceive of any victory that did not involve her breathing at the end, and applying that belief to Black she was being shaken by his indifference. Wondering if he had some last trick to save his own hide. The hesitation passed

after she looked at the walls around us, at the runes hidden in the bas-relief, and reminded herself of the strength of her defences.

"Farewell, Carrion Lord," Akua said. "Die knowing that the torch you now pass will cast a shadow on all of Creation."

"Uninspired," Black judged.

The sword went through his stomach. I'd not guided the blow, and it seemed his words had irked Diabolist enough she'd chosen to give him a slow death instead of a quick one. He gurgled and twitched as the dark-skinned woman stalked at my side. Laying a hand on my shoulder she leaned close to my ear.

"How does it feel," she asked in a murmur, "to reach the dawn of what you were meant to be?"

I wasn't the one to answer. A laugh came ripping out of a throat that was patched together from half a dozen voices, hoarse and soft but all whispering.

"Akua Sahelian," the thing kept in bindings said, "Diabolist."

Even as it bled out, slowly crawling to death, its skin was flaking off. Beneath the appearance of my teacher was a middle-aged Soninke of the same build. Then it was a young Taghreb woman. Every blink had a different face to it, and the longer I watched the less I could remember about any of them. Akua stepped away from me like she'd been burned.

"Assassin," she said. "No, a fake. You are in Procer, I know it. The Prince of Orne died choking on his own correspondence."

Ah, I thought as an old detail finally clicked into place. It'd always niggled at me, that Black's favourite executioner would have a signature. His little ironic deaths. Wasn't half the point of having a skilled assassin that the enemy never knew you'd killed one of their own at all? The point of a signature, I grasped, was that people recognized it. Watched out for it. *It's like the Eyes of the Empire*, I thought. The deadly hidden in the obvious. *How many people has Assassin killed over the years that had perfectly natural accidents no one ever thought to question?* Then it sunk in that the fucking Assassin knew the identity key I shared with Black, and my blood ran cold. Even knowing it had been a measured risk on his part, the fact that at any time in the last year I might have been talking with this monster instead of mine and never known it was sobering.

"You die nonetheless," Diabolist sneered.

"A hundred times before," Assassin said in that voice was not a voice. "A hundred times more."

Akua's hand whipped up, a spear of black flames formed and tearing through the other's villains guts in moments.

"Where is your father, child?" the Assassin said. "The Carrion Lord sends his regards."

And then it laughed, laughed until there was too little left of it for even that. Ashes fell in clumps on the ground until the hellflame devoured even that. Diabolist was shaken, I saw. That I could see it at all was telling, because I could now move my neck. And wiggled the fingers of my free hand, however slightly. The binding was not perfect.

"Did you know?" she hissed, wheeling on me.

I rasped out a laugh.

"All according to plan," I lied.

Or perhaps not. Just not *my* plan. Diabolist mastered her anger but there was more than that I saw in her eyes. Fear, fear spreading with every pump of her heart. The realization that she was no longer in control. I relished it, fed on it. She strode to the wall and slapped down her palm on it, the reliefs shifting to leave a smoothly polished circle as she spoke in the mage tongue. The cadence I recognized, if not the words. She was scrying. The surface of the stone rippled and lights swam into focus until an image was formed, and at the heart of the circle pale green eyes met Akua's gaze.

"Good evening, Diabolist," the Black Knight said, and cut off her father's ear.

I'd never seen the man before, though I knew his name from intelligence reports. Dumisai of Aksum. He'd apparently abandoned her mother's side to join her shortly after she became governess of Liesse. The scrying stone shifted, revealing a windowless room filled with hacked corpses and my teacher standing in the middle of it with Dumisai kneeling at his feet. Hands bound, his body a collection of swelling bruises. He screamed when Black's sword cut through his ear, shaking as blood spewed. Akua let out a raw sound, before she went cold.

"A hostage," Diabolist said. "You should know better."

Black, not bothering to reply, flicked his wrist and cut off the remaining ear. The man screamed again, louder.

"Mpanzi," he hoarsely said. "Do not flinch, this is--"

Akua's breath was steady, her face still as a pond when she interrupted. She looked at Black.

"You intend to negotiate, evidently," she stated.



"Still alive, Catherine?" my teacher asked.

"Feeling cautiously optimistic about it too," I replied. "No thanks to you."

"He is *bleeding*, Black Knight," Akua said coldly. "He is of no use to you dead. Your trick won you a small victory, but do not overplay your hand."

The pale man's lips quirked ever so slightly.

"I cannot claim that trick to be mine," he demurred. "The Wandering Bard taught me a hard lesson in Nicae, about weight and the shifting of it. I expect she will rue that, before my days are done."

"Your demands?" Diabolist asked.

"Three questions, answered truly," Black said. "If this is done, I will spare your father. At even the suspicion of a lie, I will kill him immediately."

I had to force myself not to glare. Questions? *Really?* Now of all times?

"And what guarantee do I have you will hold up your part of the bargain?" Akua said.

"You'll have no oath from me, child," he said. "I give you my word. Take it or leave it."

My hands rose and I felt the cold touch of steel against my neck.

"I could kill your apprentice with a single word," Diabolist said.

"That has been attempted before," Black said. "To the woe of all involved. By all means, see where it takes you. It's been a long day, I could use a laugh."

Though I appreciated the pat on the back, I was currently lacking a fucking angel to swindle so I really wished he hadn't just said that. Akua felt desperate, at the edge of the precipice. That was a dangerous place for her kind of villain to be.

"Three questions," Diabolist said. "Answered truly."

My hand came down and the blade with it, but that meant nothing. She could do the same without lifting a finger at any time.

"You acquired a great many ritual objects to build this device," Black said. "Were any bought through the Closed Circle in Mercantis?"

Diabolist looked at him for a long time.

"Yes," she said.

For a second my teacher looked very, very old. Exhausted down to his bones. But it was gone as quick as it had come, leaving me to wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing.

"What contact have you had with the Wandering Bard, envoys thereof or affiliates bearing messages for her?" Black asked.

*That* got my attention. I'd been under the impression that the Bard had been meddling down south, too busy to put her hand to the chaos in Callow. That he would even ask this implied he was not so certain as that as I'd believed.

"We had a single conversation in the hills beyond Marchford," Akua said. "That was our only point of contact, to my knowledge."

If anything, that reply seem to had him get warier. Shit. Another thing to watch out for, though. I couldn't see an angle for her to play in this mess, but that was always what fucked you wasn't it? The knife you didn't see coming.

"The cylinder around your throat has a soul bound within," Black said. "Whose is it?"

Diabolist's lips thinned and she hesitated. Cold steel tightened against the back of her father's neck. I felt it on my back, between my shoulder blades. Discretely I made a thumbs down, and tapped the side of my leg once. Then a thumb up, and tapped the side of my leg twice. It was gone. Then it came back once, twice. Another piece fell into place. Soon, now.

"A newborn child's," she finally said.

He turned to me.

"Her contingency, Catherine," he told me. "A blank slate with her mind woven in, meant to eventually possess that same child's body if she dies. You will have to destroy it."

"I'm a little tied up at the moment, Black," I said irritated, then winced at the accidental pun.

"Your questions were answered," Diabolist said. "You gave you word."

"So I did," Black agreed, and the blade left the man's neck. "Move along, Dumisai."

It swung down but no blood was spilled: the bindings on the mages's hands were cut instead. There was a flicker of surprise in the eyes of both father and daughter, and in that moment of

surprise the binding slackened further. *Patience, Cat*, I cautioned myself. The mage trembling got to his feet and my teacher sheathed his sword.

"Do you know why grand designs like yours always fail?" he asked Akua.

"You have lost your leverage, Carrion Lord," she coldly replied. "Your life will soon follow."

"Because they're *loud*," he continued. "You light a beacon that no one can miss. The lasting victories are always the quiet ones. Farewell, Akua Sahelian. You were warned."

Dumisai of Aksum opened a door, and the moment freedom was open to him a volley of crossbow bolts thudded into his face. Black's word had been kept, to the letter. He'd spared the man. No promise had been made about any sappers that might be waiting outside. I felt the blow ripple through her, through the binding, and finally I tapped the side of my leg twice.

"*You*," Diabolist screamed, the hatred in her eyes was poison but she was looking in the wrong direction and she had been made to play the wrong game since she first scried.

It was going to cost her.

"Surprise," Thief rasped, and stole the binding.

She came into sight, wounded and burned but gloriously still alive, and the world slowed as the sequence I'd been awaiting began. Diabolist turned and barked in the mage tongue in the same movement. Vivienne recoiled as if she'd been slapped, gritting her teeth. I closed my eyes, part of me knowing exactly what was about to unfold. Akua would wrest the binding back from her and seek to shackle me again, to kill Thief and then Black. Even as I ran my finger down that line the rest of me turned inwards, to the scaffolding Hierophant had fashioned around my soul. It was meant to prevent from collapsing on myself because of the power I'd stolen from Winter, I knew. The best effort of a once-in-a-century brilliant mind to keep me alive and whole. That'd been the mistake. It was, as he'd warned me, the leash Diabolist used to bind me. But the error ran deeper, because for all the horrors at his fingertips Masego was a fundamentally kind boy. He'd tried to keep me unbroken. Shield me from pain, from hunger, from the many prices the decisions I'd made had laid at my feet but had since gone unpaid. There it was, I thought. My pivot. I'd awaited some dilemma that would have my conscience or my heart bleeding, but oh that wasn't the kind of story I'd made was it?

No. For all that I'd lashed myself with guilt when the mood took me, it had always been others paying the price. My people, my soldiers, my friends. My teachers. Again and again they bled so

that I would not, and the arrogance of that had seeped into my bones as over that sea of corpses I set my throne. It had made me believe I was owed victory, deep down. Perhaps even that I deserved it. And now Creation was forcing my eyes open and making me watch what I had wrought, whispering that I had a choice. I could roll the dice once more, with a laugh in my throat and a sneer on my lips, throw my challenge and my pride in the face of Diabolist and bet on a victory that heaped yet another ruin to the pile. There was a chance of triumph, glinting at the end of that path. I had Thief and years of treading the knife's edge, hatred enough to surpass Akua's own. If I risked it all in the moment before she bound me again, I could avoid the reckoning once more. Or I could give answer. I had stood before a tribunal of merciless angels once, but this judgement was a deeper thing. It was a settling of accounts in full, the surrender of all the safeties I'd been given without earning them. Just my choices and their consequences, whatever those might be. It would not be pretty. It would not be as easily set aside as a doubt in the dark of night or a death snatched back by trickery. All I had to do was to... lean in.

A single heartbeat passed. Thief lost the binding, and I made my choice. In matters of self-mutilation, I had few rivals. In my mind's eye I looked up the scaffolding Hierophant had built and I *ripped it off*.

Diabolist's binding found me but there was no purchase, because Winter was no longer a thing tamed. It ran wild through my veins, through my Name, and a scream ripped its way out of me. My blood was red ice, my bones snapped and beyond it all my heart beat once – and ceased. There was a world within that I owned, and it was bereft of stars and moon because in the depths of that darkness even those had been smothered by frost. It did not kill me. No, in a way that would have been a mercy and my mantle knew no such thing. What I had of life was a last gasp, the desperate clawing of death's rattle as the whole world was buried around me. Bleak. That was the word, and now I understood the meaning of it in full. Winter had taken it all and left nothing behind that would warm me, no refuge to reassure me that I was still Catherine Foundling. Even my Name was stripped bare, its power dimmed and dull. I had no aspect left but one, and that one was gone far beyond what an aspect should be. Squire, I thought, but the name rang hollow. Tied to me only by the barest thread. Transition loomed ahead, patiently awaiting the right fulcrum.

"Oh *fuck*," Thief whispered.

I turned to watch Diabolist, feeling the warmth and fear wafting off her fragile frame. So very mortal, for all her arrogance.

"Your trial I have cheated," I said. "And suffered defeat for that crooked passing."

**"Call,"** Akua Sahelian said.

A bundle of power inside her unfolded under my patient eye and I flicked my wrist. Ice spread through it, cracks spreading as she flinched. Ah, I thought. Devoured but not gone. The corpse of her aspect I took for my own, let the winds and the snow bury it. It would await my purposes there.

"Vivienne," I said, and when I spoke her name she shivered.

I did not, though the sheer act of voicing it had felt like I was stroking her cheek. A true name, freely given. There was power in this.

"Stand aside," I said. "It is time for me to end this."

She mutely nodded, backing away as Diabolist wreathed herself in Summer flame. Cold crept across the room, the air going still and the stone growing cool. I did not need to will it. It happened.

"The pivot I snatched from your grasp," I told Akua. "And so you no longer have hold over me."

I felt her will scrabbling against my own, trying to seize the threads of Winter, but all she could touch was the summit of the glacier. It was beyond her ability to move.

"What are you?" Akua Sahelian gasped.

"The monster," I said. "The one you should have bound *tighter*."

I limped slightly as I advanced, an old wound once erased but now made anew. The Gods did enjoy their little ironies. I read it in the way she moved, that shifted. How she was going to wield the fire. It only took the slightest of adjustments to let it pass me. Was this how it felt, to have the weight of Creation behind you? How novel. Diabolist backed a way but I touched her chest over her heart, ever so slightly, and there was a quiet snap. Her expression went still, and I buried my arm through her chest up to the elbow.

"I'll be seeing you soon," I told her as she died. "I still have an oath to keep."

## **Chapter 69: Swan Song**

*"Thus the Gods granted us the first boon: as we live we will die, and in dying be granted our just deserts."*

– The Book of All Things, fourth verse of the second hymn

I knelt and ripped the necklace from Akua's neck, silver links giving easily. The obsidian was warm to the touch and my fingers clasped around it. Black had told me to destroy it. He was not

the kind of man to be troubled over the death of a newborn child, if that child served as a tool for his enemies. It was tempting to do as he'd asked, to just tighten my grasp ever so slightly and watch it shatter. But the Empress had spoken a sentence to me, and that gave me pause. It was too early, I thought, to begin closing avenues. I rose and tossed the cylinder to Thief, who caught it without missing a beat.

"Foundling," she said. "Are you..."

Words failed her after that. I supposed there was no delicate way to ask someone if they were still sane.

"Close enough," I said. "Stash it. Unless I tell you to admit otherwise, it was destroyed."

The other woman's eyes narrowed. She wasn't like the others, I thought. Adjutant and Hierophant, even Archer, they would speak their minds to me but almost never refuse an order. Thief and I had ties of a different nature. She had only come under my banner when she made a bet on me as the only actor on the stage interested in keeping Callow from being devastated. The moment that was no longer my path, she would turn on me. I could taste the truth of that in the air.

"One hundred thousand," Vivienne Dartwick said. "At least. Maybe half that again, with the refugees. She massacred and enslaved them, Catherine. Denied them even a proper burial. And you want to keep this?"

I studied her closely, my eyes sharper than they should have been. I no longer needed to force a sliver of my Name into them to better my vision. Claiming the mantle in full had brought consequences more than metaphysical. In the cool air of the room I could feel the warmth of her, a bundle of life that had me disgustingly *hungry*. Winter did not make, it took. Until nothing was left. Thief had not come out of the day's butchery untouched, for all her liveliness. Her short dark hair had been licked by fire on the side of her head, leaving the whole of it looking unbalanced, and under the frayed locks I could glimpse skin burnt and blackened. The left side of her leathers was flecked with blood, and close to her leg entirely drenched. I could still see the holes in her clothes where shards of stone and metal had torn apart her flesh. It would pass. Within the month she would be the same as she'd been, her Name smoothing away the wrinkles to her appearance. She was in no shape to fight right now but then fighting had never been what her Name was about.

"Do you know why my arm keeps getting twisted?" I said.

"Leverage, Thief. That is what I lack the most. They all have things I want or need, and I have precious little of the same. That little piece is a kind leverage. It may be that I never use it, and that within the month I'll shatter it. But there's a knot

of choices right ahead of me, and I will not go into it having robbed myself of a card to play.”

“She doesn’t get to come back, Foundling,” Vivienne said. “Not after *this*. That’s a line.”

Part of me, the same that had eyes turned to the transition ahead, balked at being dictated terms by one subordinate to me. I breathed in and out, then forced that cold anger to the side. It was of no use to me. Anger was a blinder and I already had too many of those.

“Agreed,” I said.

Thief nodded slowly, and with a flourish of the wrist she had the cylinder disappearing into that place where all her loot was kept. It was an aspect, she’d intimated to me more than once. That should be beyond the reach of anyone so long as she lived, and Thief was very good at remaining alive.

“Now what?” Vivienne asked. “I suppose we’ve won but this doesn’t feel like a victory.”

“It’s not over yet,” I said, and looked down at the Diabolist’s corpse.

I could raise it from the dead, I knew. Without the soul lingering she’d be an empty vessel, but a very powerful one. That could have its uses in the wars to come. Another temptation, this. The first of many to come: power obtained always wanted to be used.

“There should be a part of the city on fire,” I said.

“I’m familiar with the Foundling Gambit, yes,” Thief snorted.

Given how often goblinfire was my solution to a thorny situation, I supposed I could no longer deny that name. It irked me anyway, that my signature would be green flames devouring friend and foe alike.

“Toss her corpse into it,” I said. “I need to find Black. He’ll be at the centre of the mess.”

“And when you find him?” Vivienne said.

“Offers are made,” I replied. “And then a choice.”

Gods forgive me, but I hoped I’d make the right one.

—

Liesse had been twice claimed by death. First when Diabolist murdered and raised anew the people that dwelled within its wall,

making it a house of undeath beneath her throne. And now, as the Ducal Palace burned like a green candle in the penumbra, the city had been made a necropolis in full. No one ruled here now. Not me, not Black, not the Empress. Wights only half-leashed owned the streets as the last of the living rebels huddled in their strongholds, hoping they would be spared the sword of the Tower or the teeth of their own creations. I was not inclined to mercy in this. Examples would be made, would *have* to be made if I was to keep Callow in hand in the aftermath. This brutal a massacre could not go unanswered. Even if the thought of letting it go had not been repulsive to me, such an obvious and blatant injustice would be the fodder of a rebellion neither Calow nor Praes could afford. It might even make heroes, sent by the Heavens to put down the last of the Calamities. Or me. The days were I could argue my methods were anything but an evil – and perhaps not even the lesser one, I thought as I walked the ruins of what had once been the heart of the south – were long gone. I was not guilty of the butchery Diabolist and her ilk had made, but it had happened under my watch. Not guilty, perhaps, but a part of responsibility could not be denied.

There would be a reckoning for that, in time. Praesi liked to say that the Tower always got its due, but the Heavens were even less often cheated of theirs.

I could feel the centre of the array in the distance, pulsing like a living thing, and I let my feet take me there. It was beginning to sink in, the depth of what Diabolist had done here as mere means to obtain expendable foot soldiers. Liesse had once been a sprawling festival of basilicas and trade, the first destination of the wealth that came pouring out of Mercantis through Dormer. It'd been the largest city in Callow after Laure, and the beating heart of southern culture. Its destruction gutted the entire south. One hundred thousand people. It'd been easier to live with when it was just a number of soldiers Diabolist could field, but now that she'd been slain I was forced to face the truth that a significant chunk of my people was... gone. Irremediably. Men and women and children, the old and the young. Not soldiers but people, the part of this country that actually *mattered*. It was one thing for the struggles to scythe through soldiers and conscripts, but this? It was something else. It was not to be forgiven, or forgotten. When I'd been a young girl – what an arrogant thought, I mocked myself, for someone not even twenty to have – I'd chosen to put together enough coin for the War College because reformation was the path of least death. Of least damage. A part of what had led me to that decision had been fear, I could admit to myself. I'd been raised to tales of the Conquest, of the overwhelming victories of the Legions, and thought that Praes could not be beaten.

It was now quite clear that it *could*.



Had Akua meant to sow the seeds of doubt, with her Fourfold Crossing? I was not sure how much I could trust the visions, if they were shaped illusion or truth, but in one of those lives I had driven Praes out of my homeland. At great a cost. Dream-like visions of countless slaughters flickered in the back of my head. But looking at Liesse, knowing the Principate was mustering its armies, I had to wonder if the massacres of that liberation would be worse than what had already taken place and yet would. The Empire was fragile, that could no longer be denied. For all that my teacher had sought to make it a nation that relied on men and institutions instead of Named, that new order was being enforced by the cudgel that was the Calamities. And behind them, the many quiet cullings of Dread Empress Malicia. But that desired metamorphosis was not complete. It had run into old money and old power, and though the Truebloods had been the visible and despicable face of that I no longer believed they were the whole of it. It had been Malicia's own allies that double-crossed me in Laure, when I went into Arcadia. That she'd either not been able to prevent that or had not bothered to spoke volumes: her grip on the Wasteland was not nearly as tight as she would have us believe.

She'd effectively purged the Truebloods, for now, and muzzled their successors. But that struck me as a nothing more than ripples atop the pond. The High Lords were sill wealthy as a dozen kings, sitting atop fortified strongholds and centuries of accumulated sorcery. They were, for now, obedient. That did not mean they would remain so, and when they did I had to wonder – which Callowan city would get the axe next? This hadn't been a Callowan war, it'd been a pissing match over ownership of the Tower. But it'd still been one of our cities that got wiped out, a hundred thousand Liessen that got turned into abominations not even as the outcome but as *part of a Praesi's plan*. I'd been willing to back the imperial occupation so long as it was the lesser evil, and even now I believed Callow as a client kingdom under the Tower with me keeping the peace would be better off than as Proceran protectorate. But what did it matter that the taxes were lesser and the administration more efficient, if every decade or so a city was wiped off the map in a succession struggle? I couldn't write this off as an outlier or an exception, not so long as the High Lords remained powerful.

As long as they existed an influential entity, sooner or later the next Akua Sahelian would be born. And the next one would be a little smarter, a little more careful in her rise to power. Worse, while awaiting that I would have to fight tooth and claw with the same people who'd back that coming Heiress to make sure my people were not murdered and robbed for the profit of foreign highborn. I was getting tired, these days, of begging and scraping for the bare essentials of my people's survivals from people who it was becoming evident *needed* me to remain in power. It could be that Malicia would reform the Wasteland, one ploy at

a time. That the institutions Black had built would overtake the old nobility in power and influence. But banking on that was a gamble, and I was running out of reasons to make it. I'd grasped, over the last year, that the way to finally leave that endless cycle of war between Callow and Praes was if one side finally won. With the Empire already occupying my homeland, working within those boundaries had struck me as the better choice. But now it was having to consider the costs of that position, and they were not light. Even if Praes was tamed, as much as such a place ever could be, there would be war with the Principate. And that war would be fought on Callowan borders.

Procer alone, I believed we could beat. The Red Flower Vales could be defended even against the massive armies the First Prince could field, and the Principate could not afford long and costly wars. It had borders to the north that could not go undefended, and sooner or later the princes would start squabbling again. For now, the memory of their recent and vicious civil war kept the peace. But that wouldn't last forever, and keeping a few border principalities at bay was no impossible task. But if the Principate came knocking again and again as the heart of a crusading host, that was an entirely different game. I had no guarantees that Cordelia Hasenbach's successor wouldn't continue pursuing her policies of making war abroad to keep peace at home. Crusades had never been kind to Callow, even when it stood on the side of Good. I'd sworn my oaths to the Tower to keep my homeland from being made a battlefield every few decades, but I was not having to consider I might just have changed the face of the invader – without even sparing Callow massacres at the hands of Wastelanders. None of this could continue as it now lay.

I loved Black, for all the horrors I knew he'd committed. The Woe as well, and the family I had found in the Fifteenth. But I had not begun treading this path for love, and I would not remain on it for sentiment. The Empress had spoken a sentence to me, sorcery riding the wave of Diabolist's workings. She had earned the right to make that offer, for the favours she had done me. That did not mean I would take it. I'd told Hakram once that I had not been chosen, that I instead I *chose*. Yet for all the power I now had at my fingertips, I was no closer to seeing what I'd chosen come to life. The echo of the final defeat I'd almost been dealt at Akua's hands still lingered in me, the realization of *fragility*. I could be wrong, just like anyone else. I might be the worst thing to happen to Callow yet, the very thing I was trying to kill one ruinous battle at a time. And if that was the case... Choices needed to be made and pride had no place in the making of them.

Even as that thought touched me, I found the heart of Diabolist's grand design. Deep in the palace behind arrays that welcomed me: I had the key Fasili had made and Robber taken from him. How

Black had entered I did not know, but suspected his imprisonment of Akua's father had opened doors for him. He was not above bleeding men for answers. This was the core, I thought, but not the room from which she would have controlled it all. That would be hidden elsewhere. But it was the keystone, were her own soul had once been the tool she used to rip apart Creation before she'd hidden that as well. It'd been a courtyard, before, walled in but spacious. Now runes carved into stone covered everything, power trickling towards the empty array in the centre like tributaries to a river. Transparent panes of force jutted upwards high in the sky, up to the distant place where the souls of centuries of Deoraithe roiled under containment. There was an altar of obsidian among a circle of carved stones, and at the edge of that circle I found Black standing in silence. I knew, objectively, that I was now taller than him. Yet as I watched his lone figure, decked in plain steel and threadbare black cloak, I felt as if he was the one who towered over me. His hand rose to acknowledge my arrival, though he did not turn. I came to stand at his side, the two of us watching the core of the device that had caused so much death.

"Another rival dead," he said. "Though you paid a dear price for it. You reek of Winter, Catherine."

"She wasn't my rival," I said, disinclined to discuss the other issue for now. "Not truly. Her story never had much to do with Callow, did it? And that is where mine lies."

After a moment of silence, Black lowered his head in acknowledgement.

"She should have been killed years ago," he softly said. "I regret that I did not proceed regardless of permission. A few months of madness uprooted decades of work. What an utter waste. The south will take decades to recover."

I had not expected him to express grief over the death of my people save in matters where they affected his own designs, and so was not disappointed by the nature of the sentiment expressed. Love was a fine thing, I thought, but it did not blind me to the nature of this man. It had not been coyness or affection, when I'd called a monster the night we first met. It was the truth of him. Charming at times and so easy to love, but a monster nonetheless.

"It ends now," I said.

"So it does," Dread Empress Malicia softly agreed.

There had been changes in me, and that I saw through the illusion she had come to us through was a herald of them. Whatever trick the Empress had employed to turn Diabolist's own device to her purposes was but a pale imitation of what glamour could do, and

even as I thought this I suddenly knew I could use glamour as well as any fae. My fingers clenched. Mantles never leant power without a price.

"Malicia," Black said. "Your presence is no longer unexpected."

"Amadeus-" she began.

"The Closed Circle, Alaya," he said calmly. "You cannot possibly have missed that. You own two of the members."

I turned to watch the illusion. It was no meat-puppet, this time: this was the Empress in her full glory come to grace us with her presence. Even through sorcery she was lovely beyond compare. Tall and sculpted and more perfect than any mortal could truly be, her favoured colours of green and gold silk dipping into a low neckline it was hard not to glance at. The most beautiful woman in the world, many called her. Any other time, I would have allowed myself a guilty moment taking in the sight. But right now words had been spoken that forbid me such distractions.

"That's why you asked," I said. "Because you realized Diabolist wouldn't have pulled all this off without being noticed."

"That she unearthed Still Waters was beyond my predictions," the Empress said. "It blindsided me as much as you."

"That's not a fucking excuse," I hissed. "That's what the two of you are supposed to *do*. Keep the Wasteland under control while I keep Callow willingly in the fold. Black was in the Free Cities most of the year and I'm not even giving him a pass here because Scribe's people should have picked up on this. The two of you have spy networks that cover half the godsdamned continent. This goes beyond mere failure. I've kept my part of the bargain. You haven't."

Black was watching Malicia, and something passed between them wordlessly. My fury spiked.

"No, this doesn't get swept up under the rug," I said through gritted teeth. "The two of you don't get to settle this with each other behind closed doors. *A hundred thousand people died*. A major city was made into a tomb, and now I'm learning this was part of a plan? There is no part of this that's acceptable. I've gone along with everything because you're supposed to be the reasonable ones, the kind of people who nip this shit in the bud. Fucking Hells, I didn't declare war on Diabolist a year ago because there was an understanding that she would be contained. My sympathy to your 'political concerns' doesn't extend to allowing your troublesome elements to commit fucking *genocide*."

Black's face was grim.

"There is no excuse," he admitted. "In this I have failed you utterly."

If he'd said anything else, even pretended he actually cared about the dead, I might have struck him. But that flat admission of failure took the wind out of my sails for heartbeat. My heated gaze turned to Malicia instead. Black and I could settle our own accounts after the rest of this was addressed.

"You're not in charge," I said. "She is. And she seems like she knew what was going on more than you."

"I failed to grasp the full scope of the matter," the Empress said.

"You think?" I growled.

"How we came to current situation is regrettable, and for this I will make appropriate redress," Malicia said. "It does not change the choices that must now be made."

It was a practical way of thinking, that. At least on the surface. The truth of it was less pretty.

"But it does," I said. "All this, the oaths and the compromises? It works because I can trust you. To keep the Reforms going, to keep the highborn in check, to not tacitly allow an old breed villain to mass murder and turn Callowan cities into magical gate-making weapons. Did this really sound pragmatic, up in the Tower? Because looking around me, I see six legions all but gutted on the eve of a crusade and a story that's the best rallying cry for rebellion I've heard since the godsdamned Conquest. Now, I've fucked up quite a few times since being put in charge of Callow. I'll own that. But I have to say, I've yet to manage to fuck up quite this *badly*."

"We cannot," the Empress said, "weather a crusade."

"Praes cannot," I corrected coldly. "Convince me that Callow shouldn't open the godsdamned Vales to the Principate because, right now? I'm thinking it might actually be the lesser evil. How many of your own legions would stick with you, if it gets out you willingly allowed the Diabolist to rise? I come out of this room promising to hang every High Lord and make peace with the Principate, and I'm guessing no legion west of the Blessed Isle stays with the Tower."

"If you do this, Callow ends as a nation," Malicia said. "There is no ruling class left in this region, only the dregs of previous nobility. The First Prince will arrange marriages to these in order to bind her new border protectorate to Procer and station all her dispossessed fantassins in Callow as a garrison force. As a villain, you will naturally be killed or exiled. Your

home will be ruled by royal second sons and daughters from then on, as permanent a battlefield as the northern principalities. Within three generations Callowan culture will remain mostly as some local quirks, while in every other matter Proceran law will apply. Callow will be fresh principalities in all but name, until even that is disallowed."

My fingers clenched until the bones turned white. So that was a blow against rolling over for Cordelia Hasenbach. My own fate was ultimately a side note: if I had to go for Callow to finally stop bleeding, then I'd pull that trigger without hesitation. I'd had a good teacher when it came to the lesson of not getting in your own way. But trading Praesi occupation for Proceran annexation wasn't what I'd signed up for. It did not escape me that Malicia was responsible for a lot of what she predicted – she and Black had been the ones to shave away Callowan nobility one assassination at a time, and it was them who'd ensured there would be restless former soldiers in Procer by feeding the flames of civil war. But responsibility wasn't how any of this got solved, much as I despised the notion of cleaning up a mess not of my own making.

"That might be true," I said. "It still doesn't make sticking with you shine in comparison. Callow still gets fucked under the Tower, even with me in between. The Principate are pricks, but at least they don't turn cities into graveyards. 'Low taxes but the occasional spot of genocide' is a pretty low bid to beat."

"There will be no second instance," the Empress said. "It was an extraordinary occurrence – and mistake – allowed to meet an extraordinary threat."

"The High Lords-"

"Are broken for a generation, now that you killed Akua Sahelian," Malicia said. "A generation is more than I need to ensure they never rise again."

"And what happens when the next extraordinary threat comes around?" I pushed. "Does Vale get it next?"

"Ah, you misunderstand me," the Empress smiled. "There is no next threat. So long as we are no longer the aggressor, which can be ensured in way satisfactory to you, we have the deterrent to effectively smother in the crib any call for a crusade. The weapon does not need to be used, Catherine. It just needs to exist."

That was what she'd said, just after Diabolist spoke to me. Her one sentence. *Take this city without destroying it, and there will be no more wars.* And she might be right, I thought. If any mobilizing invading army was immediately sanctioned by a Hellgate opening in that nation's heartlands, it would put a hard damper

on the calls to go crusading. And if she never gave them a banner to rally around by attacking neighbouring countries, how many rulers were really going to be willing to risk that mess for a point of principle? It wouldn't be the pretty peace I'd envisioned, but thinking this could be done cleanly has brought nothing but disaster at my feet. And yet.

"Reparations," I said. "If you're really serious about this, everything that got wrecked in a Praesi war gets rebuilt on Praesi coin. And we're done with compromise within the borders. Callowan law as decreed by the crown is paramount. No more legions garrisoning our cities or Praesi ruling them. Callow is now sanctioned to raise its own army, answerable directly to me."

The Empress studied me.

"You ask for an independent nation under nominal Tower authority," she finally said.

"Diabolist took a ride on the crazy side," I said, "but she was right about one thing: there's always a cost. You want me to keep Callow in the fold? Fine. Here's my price."

"I will require Liesse to be under direct Imperial control," Malicia said, and it tasted like triumph.

"I'll want soldiers in the city as well," I bluntly replied, mastering myself. "Your people already pulled that trigger once. It's not happening again without my permission."

"You can't be serious," Black said, and he sounded genuinely appalled.

I turned to him, but his eyes were entirely on Malicia.

"Catherine is young, and so I forgive the impulse of seeking easy solution," he said. "But you, Alaya? We built this empire on the bones of men who make fortresses like this. *We have seen them fail.*"

"We have seen them *use* those weapons and fail, Amadeus," the Empress said, and it was like I wasn't even in the room. "This is different. We avoid the conflict entirely."

"This is a clarion call for every hero on the fucking continent," Black harshly said.

I almost flinched, even now. It was rare to hear him curse, much less in a tone that icy.

"Think beyond your precious war, Amadeus," the Empress bit out. "It cannot be won. It cannot even be fought or we risk everything."

"*This* risks everything," he spat. "Let's not even talk about how it will look to keep a weapon built on Callowan corpses – this is foolish, in and of itself. It would have us dependant on a device not of our own making we barely control, and the dependence alone is enough to bury us."

"It will draw heroes," Malicia said. "I will not deny that. But we have killed heroes before, a great many of them. And now they will lack rulers backing them. A hero without a kingdom's backing is just a dangerous vagrant, Amadeus. A lesser threat than a full crusade, by any objective measure."

"It will not be green boys and scrappy orphans who come calling, Malicia," Black said. "Every old monster hidden in some faraway corner will crawl out of the woodworks to end us. You think the *White Knight* is the sharpest blade the Heavens have to bare?"

"You speak of beating back half the continent and tell me this is the threat?" Malicia replied, tone growing sharp. "Set aside your bloody pride for a moment and *think*. We did not build this empire so you could throw it all away because you want to bloody the eye of the Heavens over some philosophical point."

"We did not build this empire so you could bet its fate on a *magic trick* instead of preparations forty years in the making," he said, tone just as sharp and twice as contemptuous.

"Your way has Callow a battlefield for the fourth time in three years, Black," I said, and from the way both of them twitched I saw they'd entirely forgotten I was there. "I can't accept that. You can't *ask* me to accept that, looking at what's around us and who's responsible for it. It's... enough. Too much has already been done. If the heroes come, we'll kill them. Hells, the fortress doesn't have to stay here. We can fly it halfway into the Tyrian Sea and sink their boats as they come. The heroes will come with the crusade anyway. What do we actually lose by doing this? If the weapon is broken, well, the armies haven't gone anywhere have they?"

"Your own apprentice agrees with me," Malicia said. "It is not your way, but what does that matter if it *works*?"

Black closed his eyes. I could feel the weight of this settle onto both our shoulders, the pivot of this empire.

"Maddie," the illusion softly said. "Trust me. One last time. One last leap."

He flinched like she'd struck him, and it felt wrong for me to see this at all. Like I was looking at them stripped of their skins, of all the many layers of deception and protection they had accumulated since they were young as I was. But the gears at work were greater than any of us. With the pivot came more. My



mantle stirred. Queenship would be granted to me by the Tower, by Name and by right. But not like the rulers of the Old Kingdom, no. Mine would not be so pristine a reign. If I was to be queen, it would be a queen cloaked in black with hands bloodied red. Though young and half-formed, the Name was taking shape. Beckoning. Behind my teacher and the Empress, I glimpsed a silhouette leaning against the wall in the back. A woman, with long dark curls and sloppily stained leathers. She had a silver flask in hand, and was taking a long pull from it. She met my eyes while wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. *I know you*, I thought. *Not this face, but I know you*. She winked, and just like that she was gone. I saw Black had opened his eyes, and that his hand was raised.

"I am done," the Black Knight said, "with half-measures."

I moved, Malicia spoke, but we were both too late.

"**Destroy**," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, and his Name pulsed.

The array broke and the souls of the dead swept us all like a tide.

## Chapter 70: Reverb

*"Six wars I fought since my coronation, so hear me when I say this: war may be fought for righteous reasons, but no war can ever deserve that epithet."*

-King Jehan the Wise, apocryphal last words

It was a cork forced into a leaking barrel, not a long-term solution. I hesitated to call this luck, because Black was nothing if not calculated even at his worst, but the damage had been limited. Destroying the array had freed the souls of the Deoraithe but there'd been an interval between that unleashing and the city smashing back into Creation. The wards Masego had promised held, keeping the dead shades from turning a third of central Callow into a haunted wasteland, but Liesse itself was beyond salvaging. The wights inside had gone wild, tearing apart everything that wasn't nailed down and quite a bit that was. Thrice a ruin now, the old heart of the south. There was nothing inside left alive, not even the rebel forces who'd been dug in. That close to the flood of souls their protection had been about as useful a parchment shield. As far as my people could tell, the few that'd survived the initial onslaught had been killed by the rampaging wights. I'd been cheated out of my hangings, but it had been an execution nonetheless. Besides, there were survivors from the battle outside the city. I would settle my scores with Akua's lot one way or another.

"It remains a major strategic liability so long as we leave it like this," the Hellhound said.

I was avoiding the camp and the decisions that awaited me there, at the moment, but there was no getting away from Juniper. My general's face was calm, but there was a subtle hunch to her frame she had once lacked. Like she was trying to fold into herself. Her mother had died, I'd been told, while trying to hold the right flank. Her risen corpse had been hacked to pieces by her own legionaries and she'd had to be brought to the pyre in full armour to hide the marks. Juniper had put the torch herself, Adjutant said, while I lay half-conscious in a tent after crawling out of the ruins of Liesse. I might have died in there, if Thief had not come back for me. Black certainly would have, the backlash of his stand having put him in a coma he'd yet to wake from. Seated on an upturned stone, I watched the wreck of a once-great city and bit into mutton jerky. I offered the Hellhound a bite but got only a quelling glare for answer. Her loss.

"I'll be putting Hierophant to work," I finally said. "He believes the remaining wights can be brought under control."

"That leaves the shades," Juniper grunted. "I'm less than comfortable with having a jug of goblinfire in the middle of the supply line for the Vales. Much less camping by it. Those wards break, Catherine, and up goes two thirds of the remaining imperial forces in Callow. And you damn well know Duchess Kegan's been making noise. Ignoring her won't work forever."

The necromantic nature of the powers backing the Watch was out of the bag for good, to no one's pleasure. Procer would make something of that, no doubt. There were too many people on the plains who were seeing what was undeniably the souls of the dead for containment to be even remotely feasible, not that it was my secret to keep in the first place. And since the moment the dust settled the Duchess of Daoine had been loudly demanding her wizards be given access to the wards and the city so they could begin the work of weaving the souls back together into a gestalt. I'd had Adjutant's people take a look at her forces: the Watch was powerless at the moment. Nothing more than well-trained soldiers. I'd refused to meet with Kegan until Hierophant could have a better look at Liesse, but around dawn today he'd given me his verdict: the weapon was broken. Not for good, but it would take several years and massive resources to bring it back to even superficial functionality and I could afford the costs in neither time nor coin. One word, that was all it'd taken, and just like that Black had smothered the last hope for my homeland being spared the Tenth Crusade.

"The souls go back to Daoine," I told Juniper with a sigh. "They're no use to anyone here, and I'll need the Watch to take the field before long."

"A start," the Hellhound conceded. "Frankly, I believe we should torch the whole city with goblinfire. You've heard the reports."

Soldiers near the wards said they glimpsed dead loved ones speaking to them from behind the boundary, begging to be let out. Some of the mages keeping Hierophant's wards powered came back trembling and talking of whispers in their ears. Others lost track of time entirely for hours on end. I'd had to order the northernmost camps to be demolished and rebuilt south because the legionaries inside them were plagued with vivid and persistent nightmares. You couldn't kill that many people in a place without there being *consequences* to it, and killing was only the first of horrors that'd been visited upon Liesse.

"I'm not committing to that until I get assurances it won't worsen the situation," I said. "But as soon as I get back to Laure I'll make it an official decree that the area as far as two miles outwards is forbidden territory. Markers will be placed."

"There'll be adventurers heading in there even then," Juniper said. "Looters with more balls than sense."

"My options are limited, Juniper," I told the orc flatly. "I will not compound ruin with disaster. Ratface has a blade to the throat of half the Dark Guilds and Thief has her own people – I'll have to count on them to keep the situation as much under control as it can be."

"Heroes-"she began.

"Are coming," I interrupted. "I know. Marshal Grem still holds the Vales, that should ward off the worst of it, but I've already ordered a watch on the Hwaerte. The Smugglers will know if anyone tries to sail up the river. If we're lucky the first wave will only hit us with the crusade and we'll have winter to prepare unhindered."

"When have we ever been that lucky?" Juniper bitterly said.

The death of Istrid Knightsbane had changed her, I thought. Tempered her in some ways, but as in all things at a price. She'd always been sombre but her mother's passing had put out some ineffable light in her. It'd cut close to home in a way the rest of our campaigns had not, I supposed. More than once I'd thought of reaching out, but her grief was not something I could truly understand. I was an orphan, after all. Aisha would pick up what pieces she could. I scarfed down the last of the jerky and licked my fingers clean.

"There are going to be changes," I said.

She looked at me for a long time, then sighed. She gestured for me to move and I made room on the stone. The orc sat by my side, over a head taller and twice as broad. I studied her face and was surprised at how young she looked, even after all this. The Hellhound was such a force of nature it was easy to forget she was only a year older than me.

"What happened in the city, Catherine?" she asked.

No one had who'd not been in that room knew exactly what had gone down, not even Thief. There had been no order to arrest Black while he was unconscious forthcoming from the Tower, but I knew better than to believe the matter was at an end. I suspected the Empress would have tried it, if there wasn't a real risk the legions around Liesse would have refused and raised banner of rebellion around my teacher's sleeping form. That I could see no move on her part did not mean they were not being made.

"Lines were drawn," I said. "I'm still deciding on which side I'm falling."

"Are we rebelling?" she bluntly asked.

After a heartbeat of hesitation, I shook my head.

"Not for now, anyway," I admitted. "But we can no longer be dependant on the Tower for protection. Right now the situation is... fluid."

A year ago, I thought, I would have backed Black against the Empress without hesitation. Maybe even a fortnight ago. But not after today, not when he'd consigned thousands of my countrymen to death for a point of pride.

"We can't afford a civil war with Procer at the gates," Juniper growled.

"I doubt it'll come to that," I said. "But there was a break. The blades might be sheathed until the outside threat is dealt with but they'll come out eventually. I will not allow Callow to be the field where that struggle is settled, and that means an army giving them all pause."

"You want me to head it," the Hellhound said.

"You already *are* heading it," I replied. "Your responsibilities will just expand."

"Raising an army without the Tower's permission is treason," Juniper reluctantly said.

"I have permission," I said. "Or had. I will proceed regardless of whether that's confirmed. Like you said, the Empire cannot afford a civil war. Much less one fought against me."

"Callowan recruits, I assume," she said.

"I'd grab every legionary in the country if I could," I said. "As it is I've had Adjutant working on the Fifth and the Twelfth. The orc now in interim command of the Fifth has been... open to overtures."

"But not the Sixth," Juniper said, dark eyes studying me.

Her mother's legion. No, I'd not crossed that line. I would have liked to say I'd made that choice out of consideration for the feelings of a dear friend, but the truth was not as pretty. I'd refrained because Juniper in command of Callow's army was worth more to me than a chance of pulling into my orbit the remains of the Sixth.

"No," I agreed. "Not the Sixth."

She closed her eyes.

"I'll talk to Legate Bagram," the Hellhound whispered. "I know him well."

"I'm not asking you to," I told her, wanting to be exceedingly clear about that.

"I have already chosen the side I fall on, Warlord," Juniper replied, eyes opening and flashing with anger. "My words were not lightly spoken. Do not bring dishonour to us both by *coddling* me."

Only an orc, I thought, would find offense in someone respecting their grief. Best not to linger on this, and as it happened I had no lack of distractions to offer.

"The Fourth and the Ninth are the real wildcards," I said. "Precarious as their position is."

It had not escaped anyone's attention that the only senior commanders to survive the battle were both goblins and Matrons. Rumours of betrayal were already sweeping through the camps and in truth I'd done nothing to stamp them out. Adjutant had given me a report by voice only that I'd ordered him to never repeat: Istrid Knightsbane had been killed by poison, not sorcery or undead. He'd told me the cut that killed her was too clean to have been made with anything but goblin steel, and that raised *questions*. All legionary weapons were made with the stuff, straight out of the Imperial forges of Foramen, and the High Lords had definitely gotten their hands on some of it. Yet I very

much doubted this was Diabolist's handiwork. The timing was off, and I suspected she would have gloated about it when we fought if it was her doing. If only to make it plain she had more support among Praesi than I believed, even in the Legions. It shouldn't be Black's either – General Istrid had been one of his most vocal loyalists. That left three likely culprits in my eyes, the ones who had the most to gain from that death.

First was the Empress, who'd had to know when considering her scheme that Black would stand opposed to it. Had she begun cleaning the upper ranks of his most loyal before the insurrection was over? It was unlikely she'd get an opportunity to make a kill this quiet for years. She was not to be dismissed as to practical for this, not after the flying murder fortress gambit she'd tacitly allowed. The second was the First Prince. Assassinating senior and famous commanders before an invasion was right up her wheelhouse, from what I'd heard of her. I found it hard to believe she'd managed to place an agent in the legions without the Eyes noticing it, but then she had shut down major imperial operations in Procer before. With the home front settled, she might be looking outwards. The last I hesitated to even think, because if it was true the Empire was done and this entire house of cards was going to fall down on my head.

It might be the Matrons. Isolationist as they were said to be, Robber had told me enough about the crones ruling his people I knew taking a few scalps to better position commanders of their own kind was not something they'd think twice about doing – if they thought they could get away with it. And if it was them... Suddenly it no longer felt like a coincidence I'd been offered desperately needed coin in exchange for a goblin settlement in Marchford. It felt like a calculated move to secure an ally before an uprising could be started. It might be I was being paranoid in thinking this, but in Praes the question was never if you were being paranoid or not. It was if you were being paranoid *enough*.

"General Sacker would not have a hand in my mother's death, no matter the rumours," Juniper sneered. "They were like sisters, Catherine. Their bond was decades in the making."

"I don't believe it either," I replied, only saying half the truth.

Goblins just didn't think the way humans or even orcs did. To them betrayal in the name of advancement was no betrayal at all. Still, I suspected that if there'd been an agent of the Matrons at work here it would be Marshal Ranker. She was the one who'd been left the senior commander here by the deaths, and though the rumours were impugning her reputation no one was daring to question her authority. Not even me, as she'd stepped lightly knowing that a Named outranked even a marshal in the eyes of the

Tower if push came to shove. But neither had I helped her any with my not inconsiderable clout: as long as her reputation was in the gutter, I had an in with anyone who bought the rumours. And I needed the men, needed them badly if I was to give any of the jackals fighting over Callow's bleeding body any reason to be wary. The Fifteenth wasn't enough for that, not with the nearly one thousand men the fucking Warlock had left stranded on the wrong side of the Hellgate. If the villain had been here to deal with, we would have had *words* on the subject. The legionaries going in had known it was a possibility they would never come back, but the blow was still being felt and I doubted the bastard had done anything to try to save them.

"They may retreat to Summerholm," Juniper finally said. "Without Lord Black to mediate or the Tower ordering otherwise, that is the safest hold for them to wait out the mess."

"It's not happening," I told her flatly. "The don't get to garrison one of my fucking cities anymore. If they want to go east, let them go all the way to the Blessed Isle. The Empire can supply them there, because it sure as Hells won't be my granaries coughing out the goods."

The Hellhound stared at me, frowning.

"You are establishing borders," she said.

"I am," I acknowledged.

"That is too large a territory to cover for a single host," Juniper stated. "You mean to raise several armies, then, and that is beyond the writ of a general's authority. My command extends only to the Fifteenth."

"You would need to be a marshal," I agreed.

I'd had Hakram take care of the physical aspect of that last night. A marshal's baton was traditionally made of wood from the Wasteland, usually ebony, but I didn't have any on hand. The elongated stick I took out from under my cloak and handed to Juniper was stone, rough granite. It'd been sculpted, but where was no mandate from the Tower in formal Mthethwa to be read. Among the traditional relief of legionaries in arms was set my own heraldry, the scales with the sword and the crown. The detail did not escape the orc's considering eyes.

"They will never promote you to marshal," I said. "You've been with me for too long, your loyalties are suspect."

"Then this is a mere bauble," she said.

"It is the regalia of the Marshal of Callow," I smiled thinly. "It's not actually illegal for a serving commander to have other titles, you see. I had Aisha look into the legalities."

It wasn't nearly that clean-cut, no matter what I said. Lords and ladies of Praesi who served in the Legions had to renounce their claim to any noble title for the duration of their service. But that was landed titles, and what I was granting her was not. There was even a precedent, though a distant one: Dread Empress Maleficent II had showered her successful commander in the Free Cities with local honours, since those were much less expensive than rewards at home. As a client state under the Tower, Callow currently fell in the same areas as the subjugated territories down south the ancient empress had taken. It was a fairly thin excuse and the High Lords were bound to howl, but Malicia had a lot more to prove than I did at the moment. If she couldn't even finagle her way through this, what point was there in backing her? Juniper's thick fingers clasped around the stone.

"I dreamt of holding a baton, as a girl," she said. "But not like this."

*Isn't that Praes in a sentence?* I thought. *Everything you want, just not the way you want it.*

"You're now the highest commander in this kingdom," I told her. "Your rank of general is irrelevant. The Fifteenth, while remaining a legion, is also the first division of the army of Callow. Congratulations, Juniper. You're the youngest marshal in the history of this empire."

"I am not," she said darkly, "an imperial marshal. I can live with that disappointment, if I hold the command regardless. But if I am to be your second, Catherine, I will need my hands unbound. There will be conscription, even if limited. I will need forges to make what the Imperial ones in Foramen will no longer provide, and granaries to feed the soldiers."

"And you'll have them," I promised. "I will have this country ready for war, when it comes."

The Hellhound suddenly snorted.

"I suppose I should kneel," she said. "Are there no ceremonies to be observed? Should a blade not be laid on my shoulders?"

"That's for knighting," I told her. "It would also involve me slapping you across the face as hard as I can, and no offense but I'm not sure you would survive that."

"Then we do this the way of my own people," Juniper said, and rose to her feet.



She unsheathed her sword and bared her arm, cutting across leathery flesh. I rose and did the same under her expectant gaze.

"Under the gaze of That Which Lurks Below, I make these oaths," the Hellhound said, tone heavy. "I will make war for you, and be true in the shedding of blood. In lean seasons I will offer meat from my table, and in bountiful days be granted the same from yours. Your foe is my foe, your kin is my kin. I swear this by iron and salt, by grass and wind and the death of men. In ruin and glory, our threads are bound. Let they who would sunder this pact be devoured 'til not even bones remain."

She offered her bleeding arm and I met it with mine, crimson trails staining us both. I did not know her people's customs, but I knew those of mine. Not from teaching, for etiquette lessons had never covered the likes of this, but from old stories. From days when this land of mine had still be a true kingdom.

"Gods be my witness, and strike me down should I break this solemn oath," I said. "Honour granted will be kept, homage rewarded by sanctuary unbroken. To she who is faithful and true I will be the same. She who loves me I will love, and shun all that she shuns. No injury or slight shall go unavenged, be they the work of the great or the small."

"I name you Warlord," Juniper grinned sharply. "Willing and hungry."

"I name you Marshal of Callow," I replied, "and in my own blood anoint you."

The baton was touched with red, when she took it, the both of us having shed droplets. Fitting, I thought.

There would be more to come.

## Chapter 71: Reprise

*"It is easiest to win a game when no one else knows you're playing."*

– Dread Empress Maleficent II

I was no longer capable of staying in a fully warded tent for more than a few moments before I got this *itch*. It always began on my palms, small pricks that I would have thought were drying sweat if I still sweated. Then it was the bottom of my feet, and from there it was only a matter of time before I felt like scratching out my own skin. I had, the first time, and hadn't realized what I was doing until there were long gouges in my arm scored by my own nails. They'd bled, and when Masego had seen to the wound his face had creased in surprise. It was not inexact, he'd said, to call what ran through my veins blood. But it was

more than just that, now. It was as useful a reagent as fae blood, he mused, and perhaps more in some ways. That it was no longer warm was something of a hint in that regard, but his current theory was that the liquid in my body was Winter. I dimly remembered my veins freezing solid, when I'd ripped apart his work. That had not been a metaphor, or a passing thing. He'd insisted on a full study of my body after that, not that I'd protested much. Even naked I no longer felt the cold, save as some sort of strange perception – warmth and frost were like... colours, more than anything else. That my skin could feel colours should have worried me, but the worry never really came.

It had been dimmed. This entire fucking world felt dim, and I had to force myself to work up anger at that.

The results of his exploratory spells had been illuminating in all the worst of ways. My bones were no longer bone. They had shattered, he told me, then been made anew in ivory. I'd been under the impression that ivory was a sort of bone, but I'd take Masego's word on the contrary. He'd muttered something about pores and marrow before telling me he'd need several months of invasive regular procedures to get a clear idea of how my body now functioned. He'd then absent-mindedly added that my while my heart still beat that seemed to have nothing to do with moving around blood, which was just the latest horrific episode in the shit I'd been putting my body through since becoming the Squire. I'd naturally told him that his proposed studies weren't really feasible, and we'd settled on him having a look whenever the both us had the time to spare – which was, admittedly, pretty rare. The two three-hour sessions we'd done since had seen him grow more and more interested, which usually when a boy was looking at my naked body had different connotations.

Two facts I would have almost preferred not to know came out. First, he told me my body should no longer actually be considered a body. It was, objectively speaking, a 'construct'. I'd pretended I knew what that meant and gone through the usual dance of inviting him to elaborate to I could figure it out from context. *There is nothing natural about a construct*, was the part that struck me hardest. *It is made, not born, and so does not function as truly living thing would*. He'd refused to outright state it, since he was still lacking proof, but I'd gotten out of him that the 'flesh' and 'blood' I now wore had precious little to do with what had been those same things before Liesse. I had been born anew, in a way. Not a pleasant one. It was also why my limp was back even though the Hashmallim had healed it. Beyond what he told me, I glimpsed something that managed to bring back the taste of fear to my mouth even if only faintly. Fae were known for illusions most of all. Was I just wearing a trick of light, a deception of Creation? Could I be *dismissed*, the way fairies and devils could be? That wards were now anathema to me might be a hint in that direction.

The second fact had been shrouded in inscrutable magetalk babble when he started expounding about it, as he told me about something called 'Principle Alienation'. One of the limits of sorcery, apparently, and also the reason diabolism was such a popular branch of it. I got him to talk in actual Lower Miezian after a while, and the basics of it were this: any mortal individual trying to use power was shackled by the limited mortal understanding of Creation and its many layers. A mage could not use the powers of a demon, at least in part, because they could not perceive the fabric of the world the way a demon did. Hence why Praesi were so fond of binding otherworldly creatures into their service, gaining access to powers they themselves would not be able to use. I was no summoner, and told him as much, but his reply ran along different lines than expected. I was wielding powers a mortal could not, so it followed that whenever I used them I became less mortal.

I'd not felt all that different, after coming back from Liesse, and some part of me had kept to the wild hope that the consequences would not be as dire as I had foreseen. His verdict finally disabused me of the notion. The moment I began calling on Winter my mind would move along similar lines as a fae's. My thoughts, my perceptions, my desires: everything I considered to be *me* would become a pale mirror of themselves. I'd not cheated my way out of the ramifications of being fae, I'd just made myself a... different breed of the species. The deeper I drew on Winter the more I would become some creature wearing my own face, and though that creature would keep all that I was it would not truly believe in them. My beliefs would just become duties enshrined in ice, as binding and unmoving as those that had doomed the Queen of Summer. I could be fluid and powerless, or unbending and powerful. I spent the rest of that night in my tent getting as drunk as I could and neglecting a dozen urgent duties, wishing my hands could still shake at the terror I felt. I'd always treated my body as a tool, a vessel to get me where I needed to be. Now that it had become exactly that I was realizing the deep divide between saying something and living it.

Yet I had no time to spare for my own troubles, not with the catastrophes laying just beyond the horizon. And so after I sobered up, the following morning I sent for Duchess Kegan of House Ismail. Hierophant as well, and him before the other. He had an axe to grind I wanted settled before going into the other conversation. I poured myself a cup of wine as Masego sat himself at my left, wetting my lips on the Vale summer wine and finding the taste of it almost sour. Some part of me wondered if it was a consequence of the changes I'd gone through or just another cost for the mantle I had claimed in full. Winter took everything. Maybe even the smallest of pleasures. I offered the blind mage a cup but he shook his head.

"It's barely past Morning Bell," he said. "Did you even break your fast?"

I had not. Eating, while still pleasurable in some ways, did not seem to be something I needed any longer. The hungers I still felt had nothing to do with food.

"Ranker," I said, deciding to change the line of inquiry.

"Ah," Masego said, glass eyes shifting under his cloth to look at me. "Is it finally time for sanctions? I would have thought she would be in the tent for this."

"I've had Hakram look into your complaint," I said.

His brow rose.

"Three mage lines attempted to stick me inside a ward in broad daylight before the better part of a hundred thousand soldiers," he said. "How much investigation can possibly have been needed?"

If the situation in the camps wasn't such a mess, the fact that he'd actually lodged a formal complaint with the Legions would have carried a lot of weight. Especially given who his father was. But the lines of command were shaky at the moment. Ranker was both the senior commander here and the subject of the complaint, and while I outranked her as both Named and Vicequeen of Callow that authority was half a fiction. Her legion would stick with her whatever happened, and likely General Sacker's as well. I couldn't just bury this, of course. Not only did I owe Masego better than that, she had turned on an ally in the middle of a fucking battle. The problem was that she'd had reasons for that, and not bad ones.

"As I understand it, the ward wasn't actually meant to harm you," I said.

He scoffed.

"It would have left me bereft of sorcery in the midst of men attempting to kill me, had it succeeded," he said. "Murder with a borrowed knife."

I didn't disagree, but the old Matron had been careful to cover her back before acting. She had, before witnesses, cried Duchess Kegan to order that Hierophant not be harmed. Which practically speaking would have done nothing – entire parts of Kegan's host had just seen dozens of their own incinerated without warning, they would have attacked whatever she said – but it *did* give Ranker plausible deniability. Combined with officially stated worries about Hierophant being corrupted by demons, she'd not technically done anything I could punish her for. And pushing the

matter regardless when the situation was so volatile was a recipe for a fight breaking out.

"I can't actually punish a marshal, Masego," I admitted. "With the Empress being silent and Black unconscious in theory I'm the supreme authority here, but I don't have the support in the Legions to force the matter. What I can offer is a compromise."

"An attempt was made on my life, Catherine," Hierophant said, cocking his head to the side. "Support is irrelevant. Give me two lines of mages and I will turn her camp into a crater with a bare half day of preparation."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to avoid," I said. "You're right to be angry. Furious, even. But you can't wipe out a few thousand people for one woman's decision."

"I can," Masego disagreed, "if they shield her from retribution."

"I'm not asking you to just let this go," I said. "Hakram's been in talks. The mage lines involved will be punished."

It was a good thing Adjutant needed so little sleep, because since my return I had been running him ragged. This was arguably the most delicate negotiation I'd sent him on yet, given what could come of a failure. I felt Hierophant's stare on me though neither his eyes nor his body moved, the subtle weight of his attention.

"Executed?" he asked, and his voice was hard to read.

"Demoted back to the ranks," I said. "All pending transfer to another legion, pay docked for a year's worth."

"A slap on the wrist," he said. "This is not even symbolic. No, rather it is symbolic of them *getting away with it*."

I'd thought he would say that. I'd not blamed Adjutant when he'd come back with those terms, though I'd been less than pleased. Marshal Ranker was not the kind of goblin easily talked into bending the neck, much less when she believed herself to be in the right. The days where I had considered the Legions my teacher's domain and therefore sacrosanct were over, though. And the Praesi were not the only ones with hired killers at their disposal.

"I had Adjutant push for the Legions they transfer to being posted in the Wasteland," I said.

"Out of sight is not evening of the scale," Masego said.

"No," I agreed. "But Ratface's staff now has a representative from the Guild of Assassins attached. Those mages will be heading back to Praes through cities I control."

Masego frowned for a moment, then his expression brightened.

"Ah," he said, beaming. "You're implying you'll have them killed before they reach the Wasteland."

I could have done without it being stated that bluntly but yes, that was exactly what I was implying. It was a waste of no doubt competent mages, but Ranker should have fucking thought twice before taking a swing at one of mine.

"You need me to be 'satisfied justice had been done' in front of everyone else," Masego continued, sounding pleased even as tried to wink before remembering halfway through he no longer had eyelids.

The sight of that was a little distressing, but I'd cope.

"Pretty much, yeah," I said. "No need to rub elbows with the goblin that tried to take you out, but try no longer to be publicly out for blood."

"I never get to scheme," Hierophant mused, appearing rather chuffed. "It's rather pleasant to be involved in your plots."

"I'll take that as a yes," I said.

He nodded.

"Good," I grimly said. "Because you're not going to enjoy our talk with Kegan nearly this much."

His expression soured, but before he could begin to speak I raised my own voice and ordered the legionaries outside to let in the Duchess. I'd hear her arrive a little while back, but this needed to be wrapped up before she got involved. Masego would be easier to talk into things after being mollified. Some part of me wondered what kind of person it made me to be manipulating one of my closest friends without hesitation, but the voice wasn't as loud as it used to be. Or nearly as persuasive. The Duchess of Daoine parted the flaps of the tent with her hand and sketched half a bow in my direction. The stare she gave Hierophant was distinctly less than friendly.

"Your Grace," she greeted me. "I am pleased your *strenuous duties* have finally allowed time for audience."

Yeah, I'd kind of deserved that. Even at the kingdom's peak there been nobody but the royal family higher in rank than the head of the House of Ismail – she likely wasn't used to being given a brush-off, much less one as blatant as one I'd repeatedly given her.

"Take a seat, Duchess," I said. "I'm told you have grievances to bring forward."

"An understatement if there ever was one," Kegan sneered, and pointedly sat herself across the table from the both of us. "My men were murdered, and the very murderer sits at your side. Not an auspicious beginning."

Hierophant opened his mouth, but I raised my hand.

"Let her lay it out first," I said. "You can give answer afterwards. Duchess, the floor is yours."

"Seventy-three dead, without even ashes to bury," Kegan said. "Thirty-nine wounded permanently. Do I need to call witnesses forward? This entire host saw the killings."

"Your men attempted to kill Hierophant as well," I said, and her face turned dark with fury.

"Is the defences of one's life now a crime in the eyes of the Empire?" she barked.

"The Empress isn't here," I said calmly. "I am. And I am not condemning their actions, only establishing the full facts. Do you have anything to add?"

"Murder of Deoraithe is a breach of our treaty with the Tower," Kegan coldly said. "And I believe that under the regulations of your own legions, the wanton killing of allied soldiers qualifies as *treason*."

"So it does," I agreed, and was more than a little glad I sat down with Aisha before this. "'Wanton killing' being defined as 'killing without just pretext' under the same regulations."

"Are you implying there was anything just about this?" the Deoraithe said, and her tone could have frozen oil.

"I think this was a tragedy," I said. "But also a largely accidental one. Masego, if you would explain yourself?"

His glass eyes were fixing the duchess with a stare as unfriendly as her own.

"I was not aware I needed to explain my actions to *aristocrats*," Hierophant said, the disdain he put into the word ironically reminding me of the same highborn he was looking down on.

"I'm asking you to clarify why you did what you did," I said. "Lest your actions be interpreted inaccurately."

That, more than anything else, jolted him into talking. Throwing around rank here would have been completely useless.

"Upon returning from the dimensional fold in which I battled the three demons," Masego said, "My sudden juxtaposition to Creation

brought back with it a large quantity of demonic essence. That essence having corrupted soldiers, I purged the location before it could further contaminate. Any further killing was made in my own defence."

"The killing of corrupted individuals regardless of Praesi citizenship is legal under purge protocols," I clarified for Kegan. "Which the Black Knight declared the moment the rebels called forward their demons. Hierophant hasn't broken Tower law by doing this, and killing men that were attacking him is similarly legal."

"I could have killed twice as many," Hierophant flatly said. "You should be thanking me for my restraint."

I almost winced. I really, really wished he hadn't said that. Reading a room had never been one of Masego's talent, but even by his standards this was a blunder. Predictably, Kegan's face was a mask of bitter and poisonous fury.

"You feed my people to demons, murder them and then those trying to protect them," she hissed. "And you require *thanks* for it?"

"The Lord Hierophant misspoke in an attempt to hide his deep regret at the tragic necessity of his actions," I lied. "Please forgive his lack of manners."

"I am the Duchess of Daoine," Kegan of House Ismail softly replied. "I do not forget. I do not *forgive*."

It was rather sad this wasn't even the worst I'd anticipated this conversation could go. Masego looked about to speak again but the look I sent him smothered that in the crib.

"*Deep regret*," I stressed.

"I did not mean to harm them," Hierophant sighed, sounding his age for once.

It was rare for him to have to face consequences for the collateral damage that followed in our wake. Most the time, it was our foes that got the worst of it. That sentence was probably as good as I could hope for, though Kegan understandably seemed less than appeased.

"Before you speak again," I interrupted. "He could not know your men would be where he reappeared."

I didn't know if that was true and frankly didn't care what the truth was. She would be in no position to gainsay me anyway: the mages could understand what Hierophant had pulled on the field in the whole of Calernia could probably be counted on one hand.



"And he was not the one who ordered your soldiers forward," I continued. "That would be Marshal Ranker."

It was unfair of me to throw her under the chariot here, to be honest. It was Masego who hadn't kept anyone in the loop when he'd done... whatever it was he'd actually done. I knew how he got when he had a puzzle in front of him, everything else fell by the wayside. It was something I would have to change in him, the going off without a word. Trying to fix the moral compass of a man raised by a monster and also an incubus was far beyond my ability, but I could at least fashion a facsimile of one through practicality. As long as he understood discussions like this would keep happening if he didn't change his ways, he should be willing to adjust in order to avoid the tediousness. That aside, Ranker had given orders according to what she believed to be the lay of the battlefield and her mistake had ultimately been understandable. By my reading of the reports she'd believed the entire army would collapse if the centre wasn't reinforced, so she'd merely taken what she saw as the lesser risk. But Kegan hated Ranker deeply, had for decades. And the marshal wasn't one of mine, quite the opposite. If doing her disservice was what kept the peace, she could go hang.

"Regardless of orders, there is fault," the Deoraithe said, but there'd been a noticeable thaw in the poison. "My men were killed at the Lord Hierophant's hand."

*Ah, Black. Even now your lessons are useful.* People always preferred blaming an old enemy if you gave them the chance.

"And for that there will be redress," I said. "Though there was no ill-intent, the deaths cannot be ignored. To start, Hierophant will help your mages reform the gestalt in Liesse."

Masego turned to me, displeasure visible on his face, but that was the least of the concessions I could and would make. Kegan set aside her anger for a moment, more interested in the prize I'd put on the table: confirmation that no one would contest the souls of her people. Keeping her wizards at bay had, in an unexpected way, made what must have once seem as a given feel like it was now a concession. I'd count my blessings in that.

"Full access to the city will be granted?" she pressed.

"Under supervision," I said, and before she could argue I raised a hand. "Not out of distrust, Duchess. That city is a nightmare made stone and my people are the ones who've been keeping an eye on it. I do this to avoid you losing a few of your practitioners in the bargain."

"It would not be necessary if access had been granted since the beginning," Kegan said, but did not disagree any further.

"Hierophant," I continued, "will also put his considerable prowess in sorcery at your disposal in order to help your practitioners ensure the gestalt cannot be stolen like this again. After which he will never speak a word of those measures to anyone, by royal decree."

"Catherine-" he began.

"We fuck up, we pay up," I bluntly told him. "This isn't Praes, Masego. We don't get a pass because we're Named or powerful. If the laws protect you, they protect them too."

He turned sullen at that, and that was the very reason I'd not warned him of this in advance. *Look at me, Kegan, I thought. I'm going against one of my closest and most powerful supporters to set things right with you. Keep that in mind before deciding I'm an enemy.* I knew the blind man's irritation would pass after he dug into the thick of the sorcery that was involved in what had been promised. There was a reason I'd chosen that out of all the possible avenues of making reparations. The Duchess would see one of the foremost Named in the Empire put to the service of her people, while Hierophant would forget this was a punishment at all after the first month. And if this required going to Daoine for a while, it just so happened that would keep Masego out of the reach of the Empress and the Calamities for while. That also had its uses. But I'd have to give more, for what I wanted out of Daoine. Masego had no part of that, though, and it would be better if he wasn't there at all.

"Hierophant's actions took place while he was under my command," I told Kegan. "Therefore the responsibility is mine in part. In my function as Vicequeen of Callow I'll offer further reparations, but I believe my comrade's part in this is done."

Masego mostly looked pleased he wouldn't have to keep being involved in this, but it wasn't him I was watching out for. It was the Duchess. In her eyes I could see the struggle: make a play for further punishment and risk whatever other indemnities I would offer, or show goodwill she didn't think he deserved and bank on that adding to the honeypot? Greed won, as I thought it would. The Duchess was about to have some lean years, if my suspicions about the costs of replacing the Watch's casualties were true. She'd want to hit me up for coin more than try and likely fail to have Hierophant further punished.

"That part of the grievance is considered settled," she conceded.

Good. Masego didn't bother with courtesies when he left the tent as quickly as he could, but the two of us had cats to skin of greater import.

"A moment," I said, and my heartbeat stilled.

The air in the tent cooled. Once that would have seen every surface in sight frost over, but I'd gained more than just power when I'd claimed my full mantle. Winter hung thickly in the air, a barely visible pale mist. No one would be able to scry through that, and my perceptions were extended far enough no one would be able to come and listen in without my knowing it. I felt the legionaries outside shuffle at the sudden drop, the two as visible to me as if I was standing before them, and I raised my voice to send the pair away. When I turned my eyes back to Kegan she had gone pale. Fear, I noted. It wafted off her like a scent. I breathed it in and smiled. It would be easy to get what I wanted from her. All that was needed was to weave myself into mind like a quiet whisper, slithering into her brains until terror ruled her and my words were her only relief. She would *beg* me to serve. If I twisted her just right, set a sliver of darkness and ice deep inside, I could have her plagued with nightmares that would keep her on my leash forever. My fingers clenched. *Callowan*, I told myself. *She is Callowan*. The urge lessened. It still lurked, but the power was no longer waiting to lash out.

"Gods," the Duchess said. "Your eyes, they... It is true, then. You are no longer human."

My eyes? I raised an eyebrow and a light tap of the finger on the table had it frost. I looked upon my reflection and found nothing amiss, fixing the Deoraithe with a quizzical look.

"Like frozen ponds," she whispered.

Useful, I thought, if they were truly this disquieting. The part of me that should be finching was utterly silent.

"We will not be overheard," I said. "Would you be entirely opposed to some honesty between us, Duchess? It should limit the tediousness."

She shivered at my voice, or perhaps the cold.

"I am not disagreeable," she managed with laudable composure.

"There is a war coming," I said. "I would like to know where Daoine will stand, and before it reaches our doorstep."

"The terms of our treaty with the Tower require a host of no less than ten thousand soldiers be provided in case of foreign invasion," she said cautiously.

"If I was here on behalf of the Empress, this tent would be warmer," I said.

She stared at me for a long time.

"You speak of rebellion," she said.

"Nothing quite so... turbulent," I replied.

"Then what, exactly?" she pressed.

I smiled, broad and sharp.

"Do you play shatranj, Duchess?" I asked, voice echoing strangely.

This I time I knew why she shivered.

"I do," she said.

"To have a game , you see, you need an unspoken assumption," I murmured. "That all the pieces will *obey*."

She stayed. She listened.

And after, she made a deal.

## Chapter 72: Curtains

*"Tall your tower may be, but what was raised by the hands of men can by those same hands be torn down."*

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax of Callow

The moon had come and gone, chased away by the approach of dawn. I still had the better part of a bell left until the sun rose, but I sat patiently. It would make the fourth time Archer went into the city now, and she'd come close enough the last I could reasonably expect her to succeed on this trip. I'd come to regret not bringing a folding chair for my vigil, but the log I was leaning against was comfortable enough apathy had seen me decline going out to get one. I enjoyed the silence, to be honest. The reprieve from everything. Out here I could allow even my thoughts to go still, though I never let myself to sink into sleep. I still could, I'd found out. Much like eating it was no longer something I needed to do, and when I did it was... less than restful. I always dreamt, and the dreams were not the pleasant kind. Winter devouring a world whole, until all that was left was ice and darkness. My eyes lingered on the ward setting the boundary around Liesse, and I found the same silhouettes from earlier had yet to retreat. Shades of the dead standing a vigil of their own. I could feel their eyes on me, fixed and unblinking.

There was hunger in them, but it was lesser than my own and that had them attracted to my presence like moths to a flame. Had I truly become the Black Queen, I thought, had my teacher not broken that transition as recklessly as he had the city, they would have been mine to rule. To shape and order as I wished,

wresting true ownership of the weapon Akua had made from the Empire's hands. The shape of that was still seductive. It would have been a gamble, it was true, but then so was any other path. And it had been the only outcome presented to me I'd found even slightly acceptable. Peace in my time, huh. The freedom to rebuild Callow as it should be, safe and prosperous. That path led to a place where I was no longer needed, but that might be better for all involved. What salvation I'd tried to bring to my people had bled them as starkly as ruin, and would yet unless I found a way out. Keeping the damages to a minimum had failed, that much was obvious. It'd only ever been a mitigating measure anyway, not a plan. One of those was taking shape in my mind, even as I gathered more and more soldiers to my banner, but oh the *risk* of it.

Gamble was too light a word, but if every other path led to a land of graveyards it was a risk that must be taken.

Archer's presence was heralded by the retreating of the shades. Even through the translucent wall of the ward I could see her tying a rope atop the rampart and shimmying down smoothly. Some curious shade wandered too close and was immediately carved through in a silver blur, the other woman's longknife wounding it as if it was a thing of flesh. The others scattered immediately in a chorus of whispers I was careful not to listen too closely to. The sooner Hierophant bound those souls again the better for all involved. Archer tugged down the rope after landing and sheathed her blade, striding towards me unhurriedly. The ward pushed back her hair and clothes when she crossed it, but from the swagger to her step I knew she'd finally managed what I'd asked of her. A cold smile stretched my lips. Good. It was not the kind of thread I could allow to be left hanging.

"So if Zeze told you shit was under control in there, he was *gravely* mistaken," Archer told me with a shit-eating grin. "Get it? As in grave-"

"You've just ensured we will never sleep together," I told her frankly. "Your being an ass I can live with, but *puns*? I do have standards."

"Spoken like the Ice Queen of legend," the Named replied cheerfully.

She plopped herself down at my side, sprawling over twice the amount of space I'd occupied and elbowing me out of my comfortable stance. I threw back her hand in her own face and she yelped, more out of outrage than pain.

"Is that any way to treat your beloved minion?" she complained.

"Almost half of that was true," I noted. "That's a record for you."

"Ugh," she grunted. "You're such a joyless thing. I thought villains were supposed to be the fun ones."

"You've been part of two wars and several killings that will go into legend since linking up with me," I pointed out.

"Maybe, but I haven't gotten laid in like a year," she whined. "I'm *this* close to just dragging your pretty officer into a tent for the night."

I glanced at her. That could mean any number of people, given that her tastes did not discriminate between genders.

"The one with the funny name," she elaborated.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Ratface?" I tried.

"That's the one," she cheered. "Aisha gets real chatty after a drinks, and she had nothing but compliments for--"

"And this part of the conversation just came at an end," I announced firmly.

"You never gossip with me," Archer told me, displeased.

"I've delegated all gossiping duties to Hakram," I said, swiftly throwing my closest friend under the chariot. "And if you're being this much of a pest, you have something for me."

"Say please," she grinned.

"Please stop trying my patience," I sweetly replied.

I was rewarded by Archer rustling through her knapsack and dropping a cylinder of obsidian in my lap. I ran a finger down the length of it, and the soul bound within shivered. *Oh*, I thought. *So you know who I am. That's an unexpected pleasure.*

"Kind of wanted to stab her a few times," the brown-skinned woman told me in a conversational tone. "You know, for Hunter."

"I tore out her heart while she was still alive to feel it," I informed Archer.

The other woman blinked at me, then let out a whistle.

"Well shit," she said. "That's a way to get your displeasure across, I guess. Old school of you, Cat."

"She had a way of bringing that out in me," I muttered, eyes on the soul container. "I lost my temper when she sent an envoy."

Made an oath, even. Not the kind of thing I can back out of nowadays."

*If you do this, there is no place in Creation or beyond that will safeguard you from me, I'd sworn. Not Heavens or Hells, not even if every lord in Arcadia swears to you. The doom I promise you will have men trembling in a thousand years when they speak of Akua's Folly and the woe that came from it.* I could feel what I had spoken binding me as surely as if I'd sworn on the Gods Below.

"I thought about sending her to the Tower," I admitted. "She'd have a place waiting for her in the Hall of Screams."

"But that wouldn't be quite *your* vengeance then, would it?" Archer knowingly said.

That, and I no longer trusted the Empress with possession of Akua's soul. Not when I could no longer be certain another city wouldn't go up in flames for a weapon to be forged. It was one thing to use that weapon after it was already made, another to enable Malicia to commit mass murder if she got desperate enough. Even if it was Praesi who got the axe this time, which I couldn't be sure of. There was a part of me that was urging me to just destroy the soul. To make sure the possible liability was ended for good. But as reasonable as I knew that action would be, I couldn't quite bring myself to take it. I wasn't sure whether it was genuine hatred that had me stay my hand, or if I simply *couldn't* break the oath. Both were worrying liabilities.

"I have a cloak," I finally said.

"The murder cloak, yeah," Archer mused. "Called thus because you murdered someone for every piece you add to it."

I forced myself not to sigh. It would only encourage her.

"Haven't added her banner to it yet," I said. "I was thinking maybe something more pointed was in order."

Archer eyed me sideways.

"*Shit*," she said. "Her own soul, really?"

"It can be done," I said. "I've heard the Warlock bound someone's soul to a chamber pot once, Masego should be able to do something similar."

"I can't decide whether that's better or worse than skinning someone and making a cloak out of that," she mused.

"Past a certain point the nuances don't matter much, I think," I said.

"That's where you're wrong," Archer said, face turning up to stare at the sky. "They never do. We just tell ourselves otherwise so we can think someone else is worse."

"Never took you for the philosophical kind of girl," I said, head leaning back next to hers.

"That's because it's pointless to dig to deep," she shrugged. "How long are we going to live, either of us? Not long enough to see more than the smallest bit of Creation. If that's my limit, I want to sample as much of that bit as I can instead of just getting miserable about all this Good and Evil twaddle. Ain't no settling that, no matter how hard you try. If you get involved you just get chewed up like all the others before you, and I don't owe anybody that."

"Hate to break it to you," I said, "but you *are* involved. What do you think we've been doing for the last year?"

"I have no idea," she admitted, sounding pleased at the notion. "But you're a pretty shit villain and you gave the Choir of Contrition the finger, so I'm looking forward to finding out."

I wouldn't get a better opening than that, I thought, so I might as well speak up now.

"You got a letter," I said. "From Refuge."

"Huh," she grunted. "What's in it?"

"Are you implying I'd read your personal correspondence?" I said.

"Haven't you?" she snorted.

"Of course not," I said, and let a beat pass. "I have people for that."

"I can't believe you're half-assing even your spying on me," she sighed. "Was it from the Lady?"

I hummed in agreement.

"She says the debt Refuge owed the Tower is settled," I told her. "That your mandated service as my fae specialist is at an end. Didn't actually summon you back, though."

"She wouldn't," Archer said. "It's not how Refuge works. The Lady of the Lake's not a queen, Cat, she's just... the woman with the biggest stick, I guess. We learned from her, but we're not like an army or anything. We do whatever we want."

I made a noise of understanding, not willing to comment on any of it given my continued sharp dislike for Ranger.



"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

"Don't be thick, you chump," she sighed. "I'm staying. You should know that by now. But you should also know I'm going to leave eventually."

I *had* known that, deep down. Of all the Woe she was the one least bound to me. Adjutant and Hierophant had attachment to the Empire, and Thief to Callow. But Archer? Archer had come for reasons entirely her own, and would leave when she tired of them.

"To where?" I asked.

"I don't know," she laughed. "But there's so much I haven't seen. The Everdark, the Titanomachy. And you must have been told this entire continent is a nowhere. There's nations on the other side of the Tyrian Sea that are larger than all of Calernia. Hells, we don't even know what's to the west."

"No one's ever found anything in the Skiron ocean," I reminded her. "Except sea snakes that were a tad unfriendly, and not the small kind."

"Doesn't mean there's not," Archer murmured. "Wouldn't that be something, Cat? Being the first Calernian to walk an unknown shore?"

"It would be," I admitted.

I'd be something untainted, too, and there were few of those left in my life.

"Maybe I'll go with you, Archer," I said. "Gods, there's bound to be a day where I'm done. Where I can finally just leave."

My tone was tired, but it was not kind of tired sleep could cure. Archer stirred.

"Indrani," she said. "Call me Indrani."

We stayed there until dawn, laughing and talking of places so very far away.

—

It was always odd to see Adjutant loaded with parchment instead of weapons, but not a bad sort of odd. It wasn't unfitting, just different from what I was used to seeing. This time, though, the look I gave the scroll he handed me was harsh. It contained names, thirty-four of them. Mages taken prisoner after the Second Battle of Liesse.

"And they're currently in containment?" I asked.

"Under ward and guard," the orc said. "Both our own. The Fifteenth took custody of all prisoners."

"I'm not recognizing a lot of those names," I told him. "I expected highborn."

"They're all *mfuasa*," Hakram informed me. "The Truebloods weren't willing to gamble on Diabolist with kin, at least not important ones."

Servant lines, huh. Old retainer families of the High Lords who'd been in their service for so long they were above peasants in the Praesi pecking order. Akua had sent the same to me as expendable envoys when we'd had our little chat before the battle. I shoved the scroll under my arm and unfolded the other one he'd handed me.

"Nearly two thousand," I said, raising an eyebrow. "I knew you'd grabbed a few, Hakram, but not *that* many."

"They're not all Praesi," he said. "There's some Helikean mercenaries and even seven drows."

"Exiles?" I asked.

"Soldiers don't go to Mercantis when they've still got a home," he said.

I wiggled my elbow at the scroll he still held in hand.

"And what's on that?"

"The names of the highborn within the household troops," he said. "I've had Aisha look into them, to add notes regarding their background and what could reasonably be asked for ransom."

"Ransom," I repeated softly.

"I know," he said. "Not what you want. But it's not a small sum, Catherine. And the moment you start raising armies and rebuilding the country, our coffers are going to bleed like a stuck pig."

"The Tower is meant to pay reparations," I said.

"The Tower's gone silent," Hakram growled. "That is not a good sign."

That was too true for me to deny. I'd expected Malicia to begin talks with me the moment the dust settled, and that she'd so far made no attempt was raising my hackles. Something was afoot. I needed the coin, that much was true. And yet. I handed Adutant the mage scroll back, and refused the one with highborn names.

"The closest road," I said. "It's between Ankou and Southpool, correct?"

"Closest paved road," he corrected. "There's dirt ones all over the region."

It was half a bell past dawn, and that meant matters were in need of settling. The prisoners first among them, since they were beginning to be a noticeable drain on our supplies. I looked north, where the road we'd spoken of would lay.

"We'll begin on the outskirts of Ankou," I said. "One every mile."

"One what?" the orc asked.

"Do you remember what Black did, after the Liesse Rebellion?" I said.

Adjutant had never been slow to understanding.

"The Countess Marchford and the Marchioness Vale," he said.

"Nailed to the gates of their own manors," I mused. "I have a lack of those at hand, so the side of the road will have to do. One every mile, Hakram. *Crucified.*"

They wanted to make a fucking statement with their rebellion, did they? I could make one as well. *You come here and you murder Callowans? This is what happens. This will always be what happens.* Let them think of that every time they passed a corpse left to the crows.

"You still have a list in hand," Adjutant finally said.

"Take care of the other two," I said. "And throw in the mercenaries. I've no mercy left for those. Then you can assemble what's left."

"Should I have gallows raised?" he asked.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Necessity and dues. Always the hardest balance to strike.

"Do," I finally said.

The orc studied me closely.

"Will they be used?" he said.

"That'll be on them," I said. "They're going to get the only thing any of us ever get. A choice."

I waited in my tent with a bottle of aragh and the latest reports while he saw to it. The Taghreb liquor was already tasteless, and it had a kick. It was one of the few drinks I could still enjoy. By Noon Bell my sappers had raised the gallows and the remaining prisoners were herded out of their camp and onto the plains. Four companies of heavies stood around them, and as many regulars kept them moving in good order. They looked haggard, I saw when I left the tent. Not tortured or beaten, but kept on the least amount of rations possible and in chains even when they slept. A far cry from the resplendent soldiers they'd once been, decked in the Wasteland's finest arms and armour. Adjutant was at my side when I stood before them, his looming presence a weight additional to my own. I gave him a nod and he barked orders, legionaries using the flat of their blades to silence the quiet talk of the prisoners.

"You know who I am," I said.

One of the prisoners in the back called out something and there was a splash of laughter.

"Adjutant," I said.

He went himself. Even those who'd laughed went utterly silent at the sight of the man being dragged to the gallows by his hair, kicking and screaming. The goblins slipped the noose around his neck and the lever was pulled. The sharp *snap* sounded like the crack of thunder across the eerily quiet assembly. Feet hanging above the deck, the corpse moved with the breeze.

"You know who I am," I repeated, and this time no one spoke. "I would be within my rights to hang every last one of you. It would, in all honesty, *make my day*."

I sighed.

"But I am not a wasteful woman," I said. "You are dead, make no mistake about that. Tribunals have been convened and a verdict passed."

I'd stood before soldiers, once and spoken words like this to deserters. I'd come to care for them, in the end, but that had never been what was *meant* to happen was it? It had been a weakness on my part to get attached. One I was in no danger of repeating with this lot.

"The manner and time of this end is at my discretion," I said. "*I own your deaths*. And I would rather spend them than throw them away. The last time I made such an offer, there was the promise of release and amnesty at the end of service."

My tone went cold.

"You get no such mercy from me," I said. "You are rebels and murderers, the willing tool of a madwoman who met her deserved end. You will die fighting for this land you butchered, be it tomorrow or in ten years."

I flicked my wrist and Hakram gestured at an officer, who brought forward a standard and plunged it into dark earth. Gold on red, the cloth was. A golden noose set against crimson, with the words of dead men written beneath. *Gallowborne. The best of the worst.*

"You can refuse," I said. "Where that leads you is behind me. Or you can kneel, and make an oath."

In the end, they knelt.

—

Thief found me right before Evening Bell, as I was beginning to consider going out to look for her myself. She didn't bother to sneak in this time, striding straight into my tent and dropping into her seat with a grunt. Vivienne took the bottle of aragh on the table and pulled directly at it without asking, setting it down after with a loud thump.

"It could be worse," Thief finally said.

"I didn't expect your report to be pleasure reading," I said. "Not that you ever bother to write those."

"Get used to it," she said "I'm not leaving a parchment trail for the Eyes to get their hands on."

Fair enough, I conceded. I knew better than to put stock in the delusion there weren't informants in the Tower's pay remaining in my own legion, much less all the other ones camped by Liesse.

"Start with the worst," I said.

"Southpool," she grimaced. "Eldermen and former nobility are meeting. The whole city's incensed about their levies being wiped out."

"Rebellion?" I asked.

"Nothing overt," Thief said, "but if they want to get their hands on weapons, the nobles are the ones to talk to. It's not a good sign they're involved."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Get the names to Ratface," I said.

Her face blanked.

"I'm told he has an envoy from the Assassins in his staff," she said.

The implied question was quiet clear.

"Not unless they force me to," I said. "They get a warning first. I've seen enough dead Callowans for several lifetimes. But if they actually rebel, Vivienne, it'll be more than a handful of old men who end up killed. That I won't allow."

She slowly nodded. Whether or not that had convinced her I couldn't tell.

"The south is a mess, but uprising's the last thing on their mind," she told me. "With Dormer and Holden emptied and Liesse... well, I'm not sure there's a word for what happened to Liesse. Refugees are trickling back to the other two, but with Liesse gone everything in sight of Hengest Lake is lawless. There's bandit packs forming to claim what food is left, and village militias aren't above looting other villages to keep their families fed through winter either."

"I'll send a detachment south," I grimaced. "It'll take a while to get supplies in place, though. Isn't the governor in Vale doing anything?"

"He's driving back any refugees camping in his lands with the last of the city guard," Vivienne darkly said. "City's under martial law and he's started rationing."

Another mess to deal with. There was always another one waiting around the corner.

"Laure?" I pressed.

"The Governess-General has kept order," Thief said. "My people had some quiet talks with those who wanted to start riots for a spot of looting. Summerholm and Denier are steady too, word's still only trickling in. Expect trouble when it's no longer rumours."

"Ankou?"

"Marshal Grem sent in a garrison force," she said. "Quiet for now, orcs in armour marching through the streets have a way of making people think twice about throwing stones. And before you ask, the north barely even noticed the rest of Callow is on fire. The Baron of Hedges has been heard saying the chaos to the south is a Praesi issue, not his people's, and he won't send even a copper down in aid."

Those isolationist pricks. Even during the Conquest they'd barely sent any men to fight the Empire. As far as the sheep-fuckers

were concerned they were a kingdom of their own, whatever the maps said. Southpooleans might be backwards mud-lickers but at least they pulled their godsdamned weight when catastrophe came calling.

"We'll see about that," I muttered. "They'll be sent an invitation to Laure soon enough."

Thief hummed.

"A little closer to home, did you know-"

"I know," I quietly said. "I have him a bell out of courtesy. If he doesn't come to me after that, I go to him. And I won't be polite."

"So long as you know," Vivienne said.

I leaned back into my chair.

"I need you to do something for me," I said. "Quietly."

Blue-grey eyes faced me.

"How quiet are we speaking?" she asked.

"I'll glamour you a body double and keep her out of sight," I said.

Thief let out a sharp breath.

"Why?"

I reached for the aragh and filled my cup.

"Not that long ago," I said, "I was given a choice where none of the outcomes were really a *victory*. Just a different kind of ugly compromise."

I knocked back the glass, allowing it to hit the table with a satisfying clang.

"So I had to ask myself – am I really playing the right game?"

I smiled grimly.

"Let's find out."

—

The Blackguards had made their own little camp within the camps. They'd raised palisades, had sentinels posted at all times and allowed no one in. It didn't matter. I'd had Adjutant send people to keep an eye on them, and the ripple that had gone through the soldiers earlier could only have one reason for it. Black was

awake. He was awake and his four hours had run out. By now Scribe would have filled him in on everything going on – that she knew about, at least. That was as far as courtesy would take me. I went directly for the gate, which was little more than a moveable part of the palisade. It opened, but that was as far as I was allowed. A dozen Blackguards blocked the opening behind and one went forward to speak to me. I cocked my head to the side, inhaling the scent of him. I knew this one.

“Lieutenant Abase,” I greeted him.

He pushed up his visor, but his hand never left the pommel of his sword.

“Ma’am,” he said. “It’s actually captain now.”

The Blackguards wore no insignias when on campaign, as my teacher disliked the notion of leaving the enemy the capacity to easily pick out his retinue’s officers.

“Congratulations,” I said. “I know he’s awake. Move your men aside.”

The Soninke grimaced.

“I’m under orders not to let anyone in,” he said.

“His orders?” I asked. “Or Scribe’s?”

“Orders,” he replied. “That’s all that matters.”

My eyes flicked to the men behind him. Fear, I sensed. In him and the others both. I wondered if it should be considered some kind of accolade, to be capable of causing that in soldiers who had fought at the side of the Calamities for decades.

“You were kind to me,” I said quietly. “Whenever you could. So I’m going to give you one chance, to reconsider being the man who’s in my way.”

“Duty has no end,” he said in Mtethwa.

It had the cadence of a saying, I thought.

“My patience does,” I replied in the same.

Winter flared but I did not weave the same kind of brutish applications I’d once used to crush throats or shatter bodies. It was closer to a glamour, really. The man’s eyes went wide and he screamed, clawing at his plate as he felt hungry shadows tear into his flesh. The sound of swords unsheathed was heard ahead and I fixed the soldiers with a measured stare. Little bundles of life and warmth they were, huddled inside their steel shells. So



very fragile, and what had they done to earn restraint from me? They were not in my keeping. They were obstacles. My hand rose.

"Enough," Scribe's voice rang out.

I looked at her. There was no sign of fear on her, no scent. Impatience at most.

"Clear them," I said, voice ringing with the cracking of ice.

"Stand down," the villain ordered.

I watched them sheathe their blades, and only then withdrew the weaving inside Abase. I strode past him without a second look, feeling myself slowly begin to thaw. I'd expected guilt, however slight. It never came.

"He is recovering," Scribe told me flatly. "You could have waited until tomorrow."

"That you would presume to dictate that even now," I said, "is why a decent man was just screaming. I've given you a bell. You have no right to expect more of me, not after what happened in Liesse."

"What happened is that he saved your life, child," Scribe coldly said. "A sentiment you grow less deserving of by the moment."

"Loyalty's a fine thing," I said. "Until it starts to blind you. Look around you, Scribe. Does it seem to you like anything was *saved*?"

"You have no notion of the sacrifices that were made for your sake," the woman said.

"You have no notion of the sacrifices I was forced to make," I replied. "This entire conversation is unnecessary. If I wanted him dead do you really think you could have *stopped* me?"

"Careful now," Scribe softly said. "That sounded like a threat."

"I assure you," I said just as softly. "If I ever threaten you, there'll be no doubt about what I'm doing. Get out of my way or take me to him, I don't care. But I'm going. Now."

I was past being scared of her, no matter the ice in her eyes. What I smelled off her in that moment was resentment, and just like that the pieces clicked. I laughed.

"He's ordered you to let me in, hasn't he?" I said.

"His judgement is impaired," she said.

"No," I said. "It really isn't. He just knows me a lot better than you."

I brushed past her and she did not try to block me. She kept pace in silence as I went deeper in, absently noting that the camp's layout was different from legion doctrine. His tent should have been in the centre but it was further back. I did not need a guide to feel that much. He was seated when I came in, Scribe at my heels. Plain trousers and a loose white shirt, leaning back on his seat before a table. No armour, no weapons save the knife at his hip.

"Catherine," he greeted me. "That will be all, Eudokia."

I felt her stiffen without turning.

"I am staying," she said.

"No," he gently replied. "You are not."

"I will not let you kill yourself on some orphan girl's sword, *do you hear me?*" she hissed. "We are better than this. *You* are better than this."

"I knew the likely consequences before acting," he said, smiling at her. "Go. Do not mourn me too long, if it comes to that."

"This is not how we end," Scribe insisted. "You promised, Amadeus, you-"

"Until the last step," he murmured. "I remember. We do not always get to choose where it happens, old friend."

He rose to his feet, slowly, and pulled her close. She did not struggle, and I was uncomfortable watching how closely she moulded herself against him as he embraced her. Black withdrew after a moment and kissed her brow.

"Everything ends," he whispered gently. "We have always known this."

He spoke something in a tongue I did not know and she replied in the same. The look she shot me before leaving was a thing of hatred, but she left regardless. I stayed silent and standing as Black seated himself again. After a moment, he unsheathed the knife at his hip and set it down on the table. Slowly, he turned the handle towards me.

"If that is the intent," he said, "let us not waste time."

He tugged at his collar, of all things, baring his neck. I sat across from him. I did not take the knife in hand, but neither did I tell him to sheathe it.

"I will ask questions," I said. "You will answer."

His lips quirked in amusement, and I felt like breaking his teeth.

"A trial," he mused. "Fitting, I suppose. Ask."

"When we planned my fight against Diabolist," I said. "I mentioned drawing her into Arcadia. You knew what would happen if I did."

*And you didn't warn me,* I left unsaid.

"Of three things you must be watchful, when assaulting the stronghold of a villain," he said. "A pivot, a trial..."

"And a monster," I completed. "So that really was your intention from the beginning. Getting me close and bound, so I'd get a clean shot at killing her when she flinched. It's why you went after her father from the onset."

"I was not confident in our breaching her defences otherwise," Black said. "Not without significant sorcerous support it was dubious would be available. Even getting you in that position was difficult."

"Our," I repeated. "That's the first untruth you spoke to me tonight. There was no *our*. You made a decision, and took a gamble that would have seen me enslaved or worse if it failed."

"I did," he admitted, without any frills. "And did so knowing you would see it as a breach of trust. Had you not pieced it together yourself, I would have told you afterwards."

His heartbeat did not change, but with him that meant less than nothing: he was the one who'd taught me to both use and fool that trick. He was also, I knew, one of the finest liars I had ever met. I'd once put quite a bit of faith in his old promise he would never lie to me, but that faith was running ragged these days. Would he lie, right now? There were ways more pleasing to me to frame his actions, if that was his intention. That he would have revealed his breach of trust to me after didn't change the fact that it had happened, and he'd know damn well how little of a difference it would mean to me. I was making me furious, having to look for deception in every sentence of a man I'd once been able to trust implicitly. He had robbed us both of that trust.

"You let me believe she took you prisoner," I said. "You had the means to warn me you weren't. Why didn't you?"

"In part because I was not certain you would be able to deceive her," he said. "In part because of the story you used to become Duchess of Moonless Nights. It was my understanding that if you

slew Assassin while believing he was me, it would prevent the eventuality of a... repetition of pattern."

Patricide, he'd danced around saying. Even now neither of us were comfortable with the implications of the word.

"You shot yourself in the foot," I said. "No, not just that – you emptied a full godsdamned quiver. If you'd spoken to me about it, we might have found a different way to take care of that. But you didn't *trust* me, Black, and so here now we fucking are. The two of us with a knife between, and me having genuine reason to kill you."

"I believed at the time that it was an elegant solution," he said. "The arrogance of an old man, in retrospect. Cheating Creation is never quite so simple as one would prefer."

"There's a lot I can forgive you for," I said. "And did, though I shouldn't have. I even let go of the fact that you Spoke to me in Summerholm the once, after a few years. Made excuses for it, that I was under influence myself and making what could have been a costly mistake. But this... It's actually worse, you know. Before the battle even began, you were already treating me like a tool. Not an equal, not even an apprentice. A fucking *tool*."

"That is who I am," he told me honestly. "In the face of conflict, that will always be how I act. I will reduce all individuals involved to instruments, and seek what I consider the best outcome. I will not spare myself a distinction, though I do not consider this to improve the principle of the behaviour in the slightest."

And it didn't, I thought. It made no difference. I used to think it did, but there was nothing laudable about not particularly valuing your own life long with everyone else's. That just meant he was one of his own many victims. It was a sort of madness that seemed principled on the surface, until you saw it in action. Saw what it cost everyone around the madman. What admiration I'd once given this had just been fool's gold, the shine leant by an unbroken line of victories. Now that the break had come, only the ugliness of what it truly was remained. Black was, I could not longer deny, a fundamentally evil man. That he used practical and sometimes beneficial means to pursue his objectives in no way redeemed that. I was ashamed that this disappointed me, deep down, that I had expected *more* when he had been so honest about what he was from the beginning. Because to me, he had been charming. Kind, even loving in his own way. Yet a monster still. It was an effort not to reach for the knife.

"You disregarded every word I said, before wrecking the array," I said, tone surprisingly calm. "I made – Gods, you could almost call it a plea. To end the bleeding. To spare my people another war. You didn't even bother to answer."

He inclined his head in disagreement.

"I weighed it," he replied. "It did not tip the balance. I believed then, as I do now, that keeping the weapon was certain to ensure the destruction of the Empire at the hand of heroes. I still believe it a miscalculation on Malicia's part to assess that having it, even unused, would not lead to a crusade. It would not only ensure it but begin a story that makes victory effectively impossible. She did not account, you see, for the Bard. Without her existence, perhaps a peace would be feasible. With her being given this thread to use, however, I would think it likely we would all die within two years."

"You didn't either," I said. "Account for the Bard. She was there, right before you used your aspect. And she was *smiling*."

Of all I had to consider, that was maybe the only mark in his favour. That he was human, and he'd been wounded like a fox being hunted so he could be herded in the right trap at the right time. That he'd run into someone better at this than him, and we were all being made to pay the price for it.

"That," he said mildly, "is quite worrying. I did not think her capable of operating independently of a heroic band or Name. I have journals that include notes from my time in the Free Cities, as well as several other matters. They will be given to you."

"No," I said quietly. "I don't think so."

"I assure you," he said, "the contents are both accurate and useful."

I pushed back the chair and rose to my feet.

"The most arrogant thing you've said tonight, you didn't even bother to speak," I told him. "It's the assumption that I'm still your *successor*."

Black was not, for all his flaws, an unintelligent man.

"You are no longer the Squire," he said.

"There's not enough of the Name left for me to qualify," I said.

"Then," he began, and on his face surprise and fascination warred.

"I don't know yet," I smiled. "But I breathe easier knowing it's not something you anticipated. Because I *know* you. If I walk out of this room after slitting your throat, it's still part of your plan. I'd still be playing a part you set out for me."

Contingencies, I imagined, would see to the death of the Calamites. And I would left in an uneasy partnership with the Empress, preserving the legacy he had sought to build.

"There's a part of me right now that just wants to let you go," I said. "To call our slate clean. Debts paid for sparing your life. But that's now who I am. I'm not you either, tough, and I don't *want* to be."

I snatched the knife and lunged over the table, driving it into his belly. He let out a soft gasp, and then I twisted the blade.

"You'll live," I said. "But it'll scar. And whenever you look at that scar, I want you to remember tonight. The choice I'm giving you. Gods forgive me, but monster that you are I still love you."

I looked into his eyes, that pale green gaze that was always so unsettling.

"I am," I said, "going to build a *better* world. Even if I have to drag everyone into it kicking and screaming. So there's your choice, Black: either you make yourself into a man that deserves to live in that world, or you're just another corpse I step over on my way there."

I left the knife in him, stepped away, and paused by the edge of the tent on my way out.

"This should go without saying," I said. "But if you're still in my lands by the moon's turn, I'll put your fucking head on a pike."

A heartbeat passed and I smiled, the burden of years leaving my shoulders.

"Take care. I'll see you when the war comes."

I left and did not look back.

## Epilogue

*"You who pass this gate, know yourself beyond hope."*

– Written above the gates of Keter, earthly seat of the Dead King

He would not speak to her until he was no longer in a vulnerable position. Alaya had known this because she knew the man, how his mind functioned. Amadeus did not treat from position of weakness. Her Black Knight arrived a few days earlier than anticipated at the Red Flower Vales, taking refuge with the *loyal* legions that garrisoned it in the face of Procer. The empress had found a degree of dark amusement in the way that Catherine Foundling's armies now lay between the armed forces most loyal to the two most powerful villains of Praes. Almost like a matron breaking up

a childish squabble between her wards. As always, the girl thought the worst of them. A civil war would not have been an acceptable outcome even if had a crusade not been in the making. The coming struggle would be steep enough without wasting soldiers in settling a matter best addressed privately. The current assessment of the younger villain's loyalties was growing clearer with every movement she made in the absence of instructions from the Tower, and the picture painted was not promising.

The remains of two legions had been suborned to the insolently named Army of Callow, followed by the announcement of large-scale recruitment across the kingdom. The girl's return to Laure had been followed by an energetic centralization of power around the yet-unbestowed crown, though it seemed she had learned from her previous blunder. A bureaucracy was forcefully being assembled by drafting any remotely competent Callowan and withdrawing talents from the Fifteenth. Given the girl's propensity for charging at the first battlefield in sight, the power would effectively be wielded by Baroness Anne Kendal over the next few years. A former rebel with close ties to the House of Light and the last remnants of Callowan aristocracy. In the optic of consolidation of power within the kingdom, it was not a blunder. From the greater understanding of Callow within the Empire, it was a warning sign. A cohesive power bloc capable of ruling was being formed in Laure, one with bone-deep enmity towards the East.

That the Duchy of Daoine seemed to have turned into one of the crown's backers was also worth a second look. It was a well-positioned source of manpower with hard borders and a history of resisting Praesi rule. The girl would need to squeeze the northern baronies for coin, however, or risk leaving the upset south in the lurch. An angle to use, if necessary. If it came to rebellion, further partition of Callow was now a feasible solution. When the south had been bound together by noble rule and marriage alliances it would have been a misstep, the seed of a rebellious Kingdom of Liesse being sown, but now that the city was wrecked and the aristocracy decapitated matters had changed. A southern vassal state dependent on Tower subsidies to recover would remain largely tranquil. It was what had once been the calm centre of Callow that was now trouble, the cities built by the shores of the Silver Lake. Large urban populations, strategic trade location and now a fledgling bureaucracy indebted to the crown made them the beating heart of Catherine's power within Callow. Alaya had stayed her hand, for the moment. Killing the girl would ignite country-wide rebellion and besides she had yet to overstep the tentative terms reached in Liesse. Pressure could be applied through the promised reparations and the precarious western border.

Which was not in the empress's hand at the moment, strictly speaking, but in those of her Black Knight. One of several

matters in need of settling. Alaya thought of the raised hand, the word spoken that had undone over a decade of careful planning, and grew cold. Dread Empress Malicia set the unnecessary emotional spasm aside. A mistake had been made, in placing blind trust. The extent that leaning should ever be indulged was in trusting individuals to act according to their nature. Anything more than that was asinine sentiment, a weakness on her part. When the mirror flickered with life, she was awaiting it. Dressed blood red, a sprawling dress with long sleeves and a neckline that was more suggestive than revealing. The golden circlet on her brow was almost an unnecessary touch – the dress alone would be enough for Amadeus to understand that it was the Dread Empress of Praes that had given audience, not Alaya. The silver mirror revealed the sight of a man unarmoured. A loose white shirt did not quite cover the sight of bandages covering his abdomen, but the pale green eyes were as sharp as she had ever seen them. Alaya felt a surge of fury. It was the Empress that had given audience, but it was Amadeus that had come.

"You are wounded," she said, smoothing away the emotion.

"So I am," the man agreed, tone almost amused. "It has been a year of sharp lessons, and this one sharper than most."

"The girl," Malicia said, and it was not a question.

Even now, after it all, the fury returned. Not directed at him but at the arrogant child who dared believe she had even the shadow of a claim on her Black Knight's life. In this, she had *overstepped*. Catherine Foundling had never been properly taught the precarity of her position.

"A point," Black said, "on the nature of trust. How that blade cuts both ways."

"She has earned no trust," Malicia coldly said. "The ability to kill is the grace of a killer, not a qualification to rule. Whatever measures she now takes are no erasure of past failures."

"Yet I wonder," the man mused. "Regardless, she is not the reason for this audience. The matter is best set aside for now."

"Is it?" the Empress said, voice smooth as silk. "Your wayward apprentice raises armies and appoints officials loyal to only her. The matter is not to be dismissed as a mere detail. It is a pressing reality, and a liability in the making."

"I had hoped," Black said, "to avoid the losing game that is the attribution of fault. That line of conversation would ensure otherwise."



The unspoken read thus: *her loyalties were shaken by the Diabolist's massacre, and it was your inaction that allowed this to unfold.*

"I have always known fault to be as much a matter of nature as opportunity," Malicia replied.

The unspoken read thus: *you gifted great power to a nobody and never bothered to instil loyalty more than skin deep, this was inevitable.*

Black sighed.

"Do you not find it tiresome?" he said. "To leave so much within the margins?"

Malicia's face was a frozen mask of disdain.

"You have lost the right to make that request," Alaya said.

"Shall we speak of trust, then, my Empress?" Black softly replied. "I am not without words to offer on that subject."

Guilt never came. She would not apologize for taking measures preventing him from throwing away his life in a hopeless war, however slighted he felt by the truth that he had become a foe to his own survival. That was on his own head. Not even love would make her neck if she was in the right.

"Warlock agrees that the weapon should have been kept untouched," Malicia said, and there was a part of her that enjoyed the flicker of dismay on Black's face.

"Wekesa would eat every child in Callow if it allowed him to research without interruptions," he replied. "That endorsement rings empty."

It was also first blood. He was not, she knew, plotting to seize the Tower from her. But the knowledge that if he had the Warlock would not have stood at his side was a crack in the certainty that lay at the heart of him. What she need break to salvage even shards of what they had once been.

"And who whispers agreement in your ear, Black?" the Empress asked. "*Scribe?* If you slit her own throat she would assume you had reason. She has made a virtue of being a tool."

It was not a mistake to have spoken that, though Alaya regretted the sharpness of the words. But Malicia knew that the cruelty was necessary to lower the worth of the unconditional support in his eyes. The Duni's face grew cold, the first stirrings of anger.

"You speak of matters you understand precious little," he said. "There is no part of you that does not come with *condition*."

Malicia met his eyes with equanimity. Alaya flinched at the old whisper spoken aloud. Black tiredly passed a hand through his air.

"I should not have said that," he said, the threshold of an apology.

"You rarely speak without meaning," the Empress said, refusing the crossing.

Something passed in the man's eyes she could not put a word to, and that was a rare thing.

"We were better than this, once," Amadeus said.

"Were we?" Malicia wondered. "Forty years, and never once did we cease dancing around that single truth."

Her eyes went hooded.

"There is only one throne in this empire," the Empress said. "You are not sitting on it. There is a *reason* for that."

"Emperesses who thought crown meant right have often reigned, in Praes," the Black Knight said. "Rarely, I remember, for long. A mould unbroken ever only makes one thing."

"Don't you speak to me of making," Alaya hissed. "Twenty years you made Callow your playground, only ever returning to take lives and let me clean up the messes while you gallivanted back. You only ever remember the necessities of rule when they get in the way of your games. You make plans without ever bothering with the actual people, writing them off as liabilities to dispose of if they do not immediately obey. Praes is not an essay. You cannot unmake everything of it because it strikes you as inconvenient."

"It is worse than inconvenient," Black said. "It is flawed. The Wasteland has made a religion out of mutilating itself. *We speak of it with pride*. Gods, iron sharpens iron? We have grown so enamoured with bleeding our own we have sayings about it. Centuries ago, field sacrifices were a way to fend off starvation. Now they are a staple of our way of life, so deeply ingrained we cling to them given alternative. Alaya, we consistently blunder so badly we need to rely on demons to stay off destruction. We would rather *irreparably damage the fabric of Creation* than admit we can be wrong. There is nothing holy about our culture, it needs to be ripped out root and stem as matter of *bare survival*. Forty years I have been trying to prove success can be achieved without utter raving madness, and what comes at the end?"

His tone grew harsh.

"The only person I ever thought actually *understood* this put her seal to the destruction of two decades of gruelling work to acquire a fucking magic fortress," he hissed. "Some godsdamned throwback from the Age of Wonders that will go down in flames and take the Empire with it."

"Your way," Malicia coldly said, "is *insufficient*."

Now that he'd opened his wound, she could bare her own.

"The Legions will fail," she said. "The Calamities will fail. Your ramshackle effort at successors will fail. Did you think that just because you were clever, just because it was hard, it would be enough? We took Callow, Black. We put chalk to the slate. The Heavens will throw crusade after crusade at us until the mark made is erased, because *we are not allowed to win that fight*. The only way to survive is not to fight at all, and for that I needed a tool."

Malicia stood ramrod straight.

"A hundred thousand dead?" she said. "I would bleed thrice that number without batting an eye, because without the tool we lose. We break, we end, we come at an end. I warned you off Akua Sahelian because she provided what I needed: a strong enough deterrent to keep the wolves at bay. And I did this behind your back, because if I did not you would have gotten in my way. Because you have fallen in love with your own legend. The Black Knight, undefeated. How far is that from invincible, Amadeus? Shall we talk *history* on that subject?"

"This makes us a leech," Black replied coldly. "And that is exactly how we lose. If we are a net drain, we are removed. That is a *fact*. There is no keeping Callow if by the sheer act of keeping it we foster constant rebellion. And if we lose Callow, it all comes down on our heads."

"We have already lost Callow," Malicia replied harshly, "and three legions with it, all thrown into the lap of some fucking orphan girl because you thought you could be cleverer than Fate. Do you truly not realize that the terms of the occupation both failed to pacify Callowans and fostered unrest in the Wasteland? One does not conquer an entire kingdom to grant it effective independence twenty years down the line, Black. We were meant to profit from it."

"They were meant to profit from it, were they?" he said. "After fighting tooth and nail against every measure that made is possible, they still deserve spoils because – what, they were born to that privilege? That they were even spared was a concession. But they were allowed to grow fat off a conquest they *actively hindered*. I held my tongue because you used their rapaciousness for your own purposes, but oh what a mistake that

was. The point isn't to make Callow a pack of plundered provinces, it has never been that. It's to ensure we never again destroy ourselves invading that country. Are we so enamoured with that kingdom's crown we cannot allow anyone else to wear it? We win by slipping the noose, not moving the border. By breaking the pattern that has whipped us ever since Maleficent made an empire out of Praes. *It is irrelevant who actually rules Callow so long as we no longer need to invade to avoid starving.* From that moment on, we start to grow. To change. To be anything but a snake cursed to eat its own tail and choke. Anything less than that is defeat. Anything more than that is expendable."

He was panting, after. A sac of venom decades in the swelling finally emptied.

"There have been bad nights, since I took the throne," Alaya said. "Nights where I wondered if it would not have been better had you become Emperor and I your Chancellor. You have laid those fear to rest. This, this is why you cannot rule. Because you're not interested in ruling Praes, only in securing a war camp for your pissing match with the Heavens. You cannot *butcher* your way into having a different homeland, Black. It's a pretty plan you laid out. But you are not the only living man in Praes, and so it *fails*. Because the Empire is not an instrument, it is a nation and that nation wants things. It will not docilely wait until your point is made."

"Enough," Black said. "Gods, enough. There comes a time where the wound is no lanced, just bled."

"Agreed," Malicia said. "There will be no further argument. You have made a mess, and as always I will clean it up. You remain in command as my Black Knight. You will hold the border as best you can, and rein in your apprentice as necessary. As for me, I will take the measures necessary for survival. You will not approve of them. I no longer care."

The Empress would have ended it there, but Alaya could not.

"We will survive," she said. "And when the danger has passed, as much as it ever can, you will come home. I will not throw you away, Maddie. We are not beyond mending."

He smiled, ruefully.

"Can you feel it, Allie?" he asked.

The Empress frowned.

"It's quiet," he said. "Subtle. I suppose it always starts out that way, when one loses control."

"The Tower will not fall," Malicia said.

"It may not," he said. "I genuinely don't know. For the first time in decades, Alaya, *I don't know.*"

He laughed.

"It's strangely invigorating," he said. "To have every plan you ever made ripped apart. Do you remember what it was like, when we were young? When we still felt wonder?"

"Black, you are worrying me," she said.

"Your terms are accepted," Amadeus said. "Not that there was any doubt. I will come home, in the end.""

He looked away, and strangely smiled.

"I wonder what it would look like," he murmured. "A better world."

The mirror darkened. Alaya went still, something like grief but deeper than the word could ever mean taking hold of her. Dread Empress Malicia rose to her feet.

There was no rest, the old saying went, for the wicked.

—

Brandon Talbot had only stood in the throne room once before as a child, when King Robert still ruled and his aunt had introduced him to the royal court. He'd been so young he barely remembered any of it, and in those days he had been of precious little import. Aunt Elizabeth was to be engaged to the Shining Prince, so he'd warranted an official introduction but nothing else. In those days there had been no talk of him ever becoming Count of Marchford. The union of Elizabeth Talbot and King Robert's eldest son had been expected to be fruitful, leaving him only the head of a cadet branch meant for knighthood and little else. How strangely the world spun, that he now stood at the side of the Queen of Callow instead of kneeling with the guests. Those he had to share that distinction with were, admittedly, something of a mixed bag. None could deny that Baroness Anne Kendall was a patriot and a woman of great wisdom, and though her surrender in the wake of the Liesse Rebellion had lowered her esteem in the eyes of some he did not share those misgivings. The Governess-General, he knew, was nearly as influential as the queen in some parts. If not more. *Chancellor in all but Name*, men whispered. Queen Catherine's open fondness for the baroness had been taken by many a sign she was not determined to wage war to the bitter end on the aristocracy.

At the baroness' side stood the argument for the opposite belief, the newly-appointed Marshal of Callow. The title left him a strange taste in the mouth. There had never been any man or woman

titled such in the history of the kingdom, as supreme command of the hosts was always held by the royal family or the paladins of the White Hand. It was a Praesi title and not even an old one, created during the Reforms. That a greenskin not even twenty-five was now second only to the queen in the command of Callow's armies had been oft commented upon, and openly mocked in the north. Popular sentiment, though, had not been incensed. The 'Hellhound' had no small place in the legends already being peddled of the Arcadian War and Akua's Folly. The orc was seen as the second coming of the still-feared Grem One-Eye, and one that had proved it would protect the innocent even in the face of the hordes of Hell. Brandon was no fool, and so had never tried to speak against the appointment. The heart of the Army of Callow was still the Fifteenth, and it would be months before any of his countrymen rose to true positions of influence in those massively expanded ranks.

To the queen's right was the same man as always, that tower of burnt steel and fangs that was Hakram Deadhand. The Adjutant. Even when the old crowd spoke of the unseemly predominance of orcs in Queen Catherine's court over cups of brandy, there were few who dared slight this one. The skeletal hand of the Named was said to snatch the life out of fae and mortals alike, the steel of his axe gone stark red for all the blood he'd spilled with it. Grandmaster Talbot had spoken with him occasionally while on campaign and more often now that precarious peace was restored, and found him both personable and polite. More dangerously, he was also very attentive to details the queen was known to have little patience for – though in truth Brandon had judged her not nearly as disinterested as the rumours implied. The Deadhand had taken to building the kingdom's court with the same savage enthusiasm his forebears had displayed raiding Callowan farmland: the new offices overseeing the nation's granaries and treasury had been highly unpopular with the aristocracy at first, but their undeniable efficiency in mending the south had done much to quiet the grumbling. The Grandmaster was one of the few of his people high enough in rank to understand what was being built, though. A war machine unlike any he had ever seen. Callow was being put on war footing long before the first blade left the sheath.

There was a reason the Order of the Broken Bell had been charged with recruiting every youth in the kingdom that could swing a blade and ride a horse.

The last man to share the queen's side was the only he could muster true dislike for. Hasan Qara, who for some godforsaken reason insisted on being called *Ratface*, had been named Lord Treasurer of Callow after resigning his commission from the Fifteenth Legion. The Taghreb was said to be some Wasteland lordling's bastard, though bastardy was considered a lesser taint in the East. He was also, as far as Grandmaster Talbot was

concerned, a crook and a criminal. His lordly title remained a pure courtesy one, at least, without any lands attached. It was still a bloody disgrace that a Peer of the Realm would meet with the likes of smugglers and hedges mages in broad daylight. The Bastard Lord, as some already called him, had begun what he termed a 'much-needed reform of the hellish nightmare that is Callowan tax collection'. That governors no longer paid taxes directly to the Tower or even the short-lived Ruling Council had thrown the old system into disarray, every governor and noble trying to short-change the crown whenever they could. Lord Qara's taxmen and their Legion escorts were already a dreaded sight, and the complicated maze of exemptions and tariffs he'd had the queen put her seal to always seemed to have her allies come out wealthier and her enemies poorer. He was clever, Brandon disdainfully thought, but in the way Taghreb usurers so often were.

As the admittedly tedious ceremony chugged on towards the moment of proper coronation, Brandon turned his eyes to the crowd that stood witness. Baron Darlington of Hedges and Baroness Morley of Harrow were of the highest rank among those, surrounded by kin and lickspittles. Both, he'd been told, had declined the queen's invitation to her coronation by telling her envoys their health would not allow them the journey. The second envoys she had sent came with a minstrel, and as the tune of the *Lord's Lament* played in their halls the nobles had reconsidered their refusal. The pointed reminder that Queen Catherine was not above having even royalty shot when it suited her had struck true. The last landed nobles of Callow had faces so solemn to be truly pleased of being in attendance, but rumours of the crown's young reforms had seen them hurry south so they would not be made to feel the sting of disobedience through their coffers. As far as nobility went, the only others worth the note were the envoys of Duchess Kegan of Daoine.

That the ruler of the last duchy in Callow had sent her own eldest son and high-ranking officer of the Watch to attend had rightly been seen by many as endorsement of the queen's reign by the Deoraithe. Ties had been made there, Grandmaster Talbot thought, that he knew little about. Inquiries were in order. The queen had yet to appoint a Chamberlain for her household or a Keeper of the Seals to have her decrees upheld and her courts of law put to order, after all. It was no certainty that Queen Catherine the First would keep all the seats of the old King's Council, but if she did Brandon intended on seeing the remaining seats filled with proper Callowans, not Daoine interlopers. Neither did it escape his notice that Kegan's son was a handsome lad, not much older than the still-unmarried queen. Another matter to ensure never came to fruition, though he could hardly blame her for trying. He had himself ensured that his representatives at court were well-bred young men and women of

comely appearance, merely to have that avenue... open, should it take the queen's fancy.

The rest of the guests in attendance were the representatives of governors and guilds, as well as every elderman in Laure. Brandon had expected trouble when their ancient prerogatives inside the city began being taken over by the crown, but the Deadhand was a clever sort. They'd been offered appointments in the new offices, and with enough accepting their influence came to benefit the reforms instead of being plied against them. The stood there with awe befitting commoners being allowed to witness the birth of a dynasty, however fragile its line of succession. As the sister sent by the House of Light finally ended her droning and recitation of old phrases, Queen Catherine bent her head to accept her crown – though, in all honesty, given her height she had not strictly speaking needed to do so. Eyes flicking to the crown, Brandon grimly smiled. No gold or jewels in this one. It was a jagged circlet of iron that sat heavy on her brow. A warlike crown for a warlike queen. The old regalia of House Fairfax would not see use again, the cloak of black and patchwork that Queen Catherine wore a dark replacement for the old ermine-bordered mantle of the Fairfaxes. Rumours had spread that Akua Sahelian's own soul had been added to the banners of the defeated, that the Wastelander witch could be heard screaming in torment if one listened closely enough.

A saying was born of it that had Grandmaster Talbot shivering every time he heard the words: *crowned by dread and cloaked by woe*.

"Before you stands the ordained Queen of Callow," the sister said. "Kneel."

One after another, they did. Only standing by the throne like him were spared that, as Catherine Foundling slowly sat the ancient throne of the kingdom. Brandon was not the first to notice – he first saw when he followed the queen's gaze, the raised eyebrow on her cold face. It was difficult to tell how many there were. A few dozens? Less than a hundred, surely. Brandon had fought their like before, but their garments were no longer the same. On unearthly steeds of every shade the fae rode through the hall, the Fair Folk as terrible and beautiful as they'd always been. Brandon found he could not look away from the fae at their head. Riding a horse of ebony, the man was soberly dressed for his kind. A simple tunic, though the buttons seemed made of shade, and over a pale and narrow face a black silken blindfold covered an eye. There was a sword at his hip, without a sheath, and even looking at it hurt the knight's eyes. It was that one the queen addresses.

"The Prince of Nightfall," she drawled. "An unexpected... well, *pleasure's* a strong word."



The procession of fae ended when the prince reined in his mount before the queen, inclining his head in respectful greeting.

"Prince no longer," the fae smiled. "I have abdicated my title, as have all with me. The Hunt claims no lord amongst its hunters."

Brandon's breath hitched. The Hunt. Was he speaking of the *Wild Hunt*? The rapacious fairies that made sport of mortals fools enough to wander into the Waning Woods, or walk ancient mounds under pale moonlight.

"Should I call you Larat, then?" the Queen mused, and her voice echoed with something eldritch when she spoke the name. "Why do you darken my hall, Nightfall?"

"Do we not stand before a queen, forged of Winter?" the fae asked.

"I paid the price for that, thrice over," Catherine Foundling said. "If you think the mantle can be taken back, we're about to have a conversation on the subject of fatal mistakes."

The fae laughed, and it was like the tinkle of silver bells.

"You mistake me," he said, and his sword rose.

It clattered against the stone, laid at the feet of the queen. One after another the fae passed and threw their own blade, a pile of death rising. Brandon Talbot was living a fever dream, witness to a scene ripped straight from legend. It was all too vivid to be real.

"We swear to your service, Queen of the Hunt," the fae said. "Queen of Air and Darkness, Sovereign of Moonless Nights. We swear 'til the day of last ruin, 'til all debts are paid. We would ride beneath your banner, in this world and every other."

The Queen of Callow rose to her feet, as bright and terrible as any of them, and softly laughed.

"What clever foxes you are," she said. "Your oaths I accept, in the spirit they were given."

Her sword hissed as it left the sheath, and she stood before the fae.

"Kneel, and rise in my service."

The Hunt knelt, the Hunt rose, and Brandon Talbot knew he would never forget the sight of this so long as he lived.

A crusade, Cordelia Hasenbach thought, should be decided in a manner grander than this. There would be speeches in the coming months, every herald in Procer and beyond speaking the writ of the Mandate of Heaven handed down to the children of the Gods. Spreading the call to the Tenth Crusade wherever there were ears to hear it. The First Prince herself would address the Highest Assembly on the morrow's eve, giving an oration she had first prepared years ago. The motion would not warrant a vote from the Assembly, though she knew it would pass should it presented. By tradition only the highest office in the Principate could call for a crusade, though it would be an empty thing if no other nation joined their voice to it. Procer had fought crusades alone before, but every one a disaster. She would not repeat that mistake. The young woman had dedicated the span of her life to ensuring it would never be made again. For all the pageantry that was to come, the Tenth Crusade was born in one of the lesser halls of the palace in Salia, with barely a dozen people seated at the table.

For Procer, only she and Uncle Klaus were present. The Prince of Hannover had not been granted seat as a prince but as the future commander of Procer's armies in the campaign to come. The grizzled old soldiers had spent more time drinking mead than speaking, so far, save when matters military were raised. Assurances had been needed that the Principate's armies were readied for war, no matter how righteous the cause or urgent the need. The Thalassocracy of Ashur had sent three representatives only, members in good standing of their foremost War Committee. Citizens of the Fourth tier one and all, most of which would take command of Ashur's fleets when the hostilities began. Their very presence had been leverage for Cordelia to use, a gift from Magon Hadast. The only citizen of the Second tier in all of Ashur had not sent diplomats but soldiers, the agreement to join the crusade implicit to that decision. The envoys, after all, would not have leave to negotiate diplomatic matters. Only those pertaining to war.

The Dominion of Levant had sent the most envoys, in her judgement a consequence of its ever-fractious people. The current Seljun, the figurehead ruler of the Dominion, had officially deferred the decision of whether or not to join the Tenth Crusade to the Majilis. Though literature often drew comparison between the Highest Assembly and the Majilis, for they were both councils composed of the highest nobility in their respective nations, Cordelia had never found much similarity beyond the surface trappings. The Levantine council was a toothless and ineffectual beast, with every lord and lady among it having right of veto and every interest in ensuring power was never centralized within the Dominion lest their own privileges be curbed. Princess Eliza of Salamans had fought two wars and died an attainted traitor to ensure the Highest Assembly would never be such a plague on Procer, or the First Prince relegated to being little more than a

first among equals. As it was, the entire Majilis had come to Salia to treat with her. The five lords and ladies of Levant, all descended from heroes. Cordelia's agents suspected every one of them had applied veto if a smaller delegation did not involve them personally, and she was inclined to believe it.

They only ever ceased their squabbles when they perceived her to be high-handed, the old and well-deserved hatred of her people the true mortar that kept their nation together. They had been the most difficult to speak with, ever looking for slight or arrogance in every sentence of hers. It was for the best Uncle Klaus had spoken little, given his mild contempt for a nation he liked to say existed only because the Thalassocracy willed it so. This was, to an extent, true. Some of Cordelia's predecessors would have waged war upon war to claim the lands, had Ashuran fleets not made seaborne invasion of Procer's old principalities a fool's errand to attempt. It was still less than courteous to say as much, and the Levantines had easily ruffled feathers when the hands involved were Proceran. Invitations had been sent to the Titanomachy through the Dominion, as the Gigantes killed on sight even diplomats of Procer, but the giants had declined to send even an observer. Their borders would remain closed, it seemed, no matter how dire the threats to the east. Cordelia had ruled for too long to be disappointed by the confirmation of her fatalism. That bridge had been burned too thoroughly to be rebuilt, even several centuries after the betrayal known as the Humbling of Titans.

The Gigantes had long memories.

The elves of the Golden Bloom greeted visitors with arrows if they were not heroes, and were said to have removed their domain from Creation besides. Even were it otherwise, Cordelia would not have sought them out. They had never joined their number to any of the crusades, and their inclusion in the Tenth would have had stark diplomatic consequences when it came to dealing with the Duchy of Daoine. Entrenching opposition in Callow would be needlessly costly for what the Hasenbach desired to be a war fought mostly in Praes itself. Popular sentiment in Callow was rather difficult to read, these days, but they were a people of long grudges who had never quite forgiven their occupation by the Principate. Should foreign soldiers fight over their fields for too long, there was no telling if the Callowans would turn on the crusaders.

Still, it was the League of Free Cities that troubled Cordelia. She'd come so very close to securing a truce and south-eastern border with it, until the Tyrant of Helike began his war. Even that had been an acceptable outcome, if she was to be honest. After the initial victory of Helikean forces over Atalante and the brutally effective Praesi intervention that took Penthes out of the war, heroes had created a deadlock over the siege of Delos

without easy resolution. Though the loss of life involved was regrettable, it had given Cordelia opportunity to exhaust the strength of a dangerous element outside her borders by funding and arming Nicae. She'd even lightened the burden of restless soldiery within her realm by sending a few thousand into the war. She had believed Helike triumphant and ruling the League to be the worst possible outcome, and so when the forces of the Tyrant and the Magisterium moved against Nicae she had considered direct intervention. That a Hierarch would be elected in the wake of the city's fall had been beyond her predictions, and more worryingly the Augur's as well. Now no ruler in the region would treat with her, even privately, as usurping the Hierarch's prerogative might see the rest of the League turn on them.

Attempts to begin diplomatic correspondence with the man himself had been utterly ineffective. That her agents reported Anaxares of Bellerophon to be a long-serving diplomat, even if one in the service of an Evil polity, had been a promising beginning. Yet the man had put every missive she sent to the flame, and had reportedly been personally offended when her envoys tried to speak with him in person. Whether or not the Hierarch was the puppet of the ruler of Helike had yet to be determined, but the head of the League seemed disinclined to rein his member-states. Or even speak of the matter. Perhaps the only redemption of the situation there was to be had was that the Hierarch had not spoken in the favour of war, and his absence of a grip on the cities meant it was unlikely a unified League would march against her. It was still a liability. Her uncle had made it plain that at least twenty thousand men would have to be left south to discourage incursions from the Free Cities while the crusade was being fought. A loss, she would admit, but not a crippling one. Ashur and Levant would both contribute much larger hosts to the war when they gathered their strength.

"Late spring at the earliest," Lady Itima of Vaccei announced. "But we will march, First Prince. All of us. There can be no other choice."

Set on the table before all the representatives were two reports from her agents in Callow, speaking of the same city. Liesse, though it had been ripped from its ancient grounds and dragged across the kingdom. The first report detailed what sparse information she had been able to gather about these strange undead the Diabolist had been able to make. *Wights*, the Praesi called them. One had even been obtained and smuggled across the border, and examinations by wizards had established the alchemical nature of the transition into undeath. The Empire had unveiled two weapons through their civil war, and though this was the subtlest of the two it was perhaps also the most terrifying. If all the Empire needed to sow undeath was access to a city's cisterns, none of them were safe. The Empress' reputation for having a large and extremely effective web of spies had cost her

dearly in this. A less demonstrably far-reaching ruler would not have seemed so immediate a threat. The other report held mostly technical notes, but it was the sheet of parchment with the drawing that had truly stuck a blow. The sight of the city of Liesse with a mass of dead above it, and the Greater Breach the weapon had opened on a Callowan field.

A Hellgate, and not a passing one. Gods, Cordelia had known there was great madness waiting in the east but even she had underestimated the depth. No crusade had ever managed to land even a glancing blow on the Hellgate that lay within the depths of Keter. It alone had been enough to maintain the terrible grip of the Dead King for untold centuries even with entire battalions of heroes failing to end him. The thought of the Tower with the ability to create Hellgates at will was enough to put a shiver up anyone's spine. She'd been open about the weapon being either damaged or destroyed during the civil war, the truth of that was still uncertain, but she'd not even had to raise the notion of it being possible to repair herself. The Levantines had done so without prompting, and pressed for a dismantling of the Empire to ensure it would never be capable of making the likes of it again.

"As for the charter you proposed, we are in agreement as well," the lord of Tartessos said. "It will require the signature of the Seljun to be binding, but the Majilis can provisionally ratify it. Your... appreciation of our concerns has been noted, and does you honour."

Cordelia was very careful not to let the triumph show in her eyes. This was the true victory she had won today, the founding of her Grand Alliance. Though it had been presented as a council of nations participating in the Tenth Crusade that could adjudicate internal disputes, there was no clause forcing the alliance to end after Praes was laid low. Years of diplomacy had finally borne fruit. The treaties would prevent Procer from attempting to expand into the Dominion again long after she died, and with this foundation she could forge ever closer ties over the length of her reign. With the three great powers of the west so aligned, the Principate's attention could be turned to the true enemies. The Chain of Hunger. The Kingdom of the Dead. The Everdark. The treaties were not even a pale shadow of those that bound together the League of Free Cities, but they could be built on. They *would* be.

Cordelia knew she would not see the continent know true peace in her lifetime, but she could lay the foundations for those that would come after her.

The envoys were entertained for refreshments after the negotiations closed, yet the First Prince did not linger overlong. She had spoken to the Augur, last night, and been given prophecy. *Fortune comes to you unannounced*, her cousin had

whispered. *You may yet grasp it.* Some of the White Knight's band had survived the struggle against the Calamities in the Free Cities, and were said to be heading for Salia with the man himself. Crusades, Cordelia knew, were a call few heroes let pass them by. Though no formal declaration had yet been made, the ways of Named were not easily understood. The Heavens may have whispered secrets in their ears, as they did the Augur. The flaxen-haired prince dismissed her attendants after retiring to her rooms, unweaving her braid herself. She was not unaware that it softened her features when unbound, and though she knew she was no great beauty she could sometimes pass as one with the right ministrations. She did not hear the window open, and was frowning at letter from the Princess of Tenerife when someone cleared their throat.

Cordelia froze. It was a woman. Short of hair, pale of skin with blue-grey eyes. Her leathers were loose over a slender frame. *Callowan*, the First Prince thought. *She has the look.*

"Would you like a drink?" Cordelia Hasenbach asked.

The woman snorted.

"I wish," she said. "But getting into this place was hard enough sober. Have you ever tripped into a moat? It's honestly the *worst.*"

The First Prince smiled pleasantly.

"I will take your word on it," she said. "I would be remiss if I did not ask who you are, of course."

The stranger plopped down onto a seat across from her.

"I am a halfway decent thief," the woman said. "A patriot, when I can afford to be. But, most importantly—"

She sharply smiled.

"— I am an envoy from the Queen of Callow."

"Are you now?" Cordelia said. "I believe I will be having that drink, myself. We have much to talk about."

—

The Hierarch saw many things, close and faraway. Deals being struck behind closed doors in this very city, armies mustered and betrayals paid for. In a cold room of black stone, he watched the most beautiful woman he'd ever glimpsed wipe away a tear and clench her teeth. By the crackling hearth of an inn he saw a knight and a champion clasp arms with older heroes, whispering of Heaven's Mandate. He saw a young girl on an ill-fitting throne, lost but unwilling to retreat. He saw the fields of a Hell tilled

and strewn with villages, its people never having known a blue sky. He saw knives bared beneath the earth, north and south, skins of black and green ghosting through tunnels. He saw a green-eyed man grinning in the face of havoc, alone with well-worn maps. He saw... a silent young girl, her skin pale as porcelain. Her blue dress was light and her hair cut in a short bob. Her eyes met his, impossibly.

"Curious," the Augur said. "You were not within the sparrows."

"The People have decreed omens to be ignorant superstition," Anaxares told her.

"Ah," Agnes Hasenbach murmured "You too. No star left uncharted."

Hierarch woke in a dirty alley, huddled under a threadbare blanket. It had been the clink of coppers being dropped in his begging bowl that woke him. Anaxares was not alone. At his side, leaning back against the husk of a wall, a woman sat with her knees gathered to her chest. She smelled of liquor and sweat, though the black curls he could see framing her face were pristine. The stranger drank loudly from a silver flask before turning to him, and when he saw her face he recognized her. Aoede of Nicae. The Wandering Bard. The heroine offered him the flask, wiggling it in a farce of temptation.

"It's the good stuff, for once," the Bard grinned. "Don't skip, doesn't happen often."

The Hierarch of the League of Free Cities, anointed temporal ruler of a hundreds of thousands of souls, tightened his blanket around his frame. He looked aside and pretended the woman did not exist. He had gained much practice in this skill of late, with envoys from the Free Cities and beyond.

"You know, when the second wave of Baalite settles came to Ashur they brought animals from home with them," the woman said. "One of them was a large flightless bird, called an ostrich. Odd creatures. Liked to bury their heads in the ground, a feeling I can empathize with. When the first famine came, though, the big fat ostriches were slaughtered like poultry. Even though their heads were in the sand."

Anaxares stared ahead, silent.

"Tough crowd, huh," the Bard mused. "It's too late to stay out of it, Hierarch. You're Named, now. Means you're fair game."

"I did not choose this," Anaxares said.

"So I've heard," the Bard said. "Kairos has that thing villains often do, where they confuse symmetry with humour. Probably got a giggle out of waving an old mistake in my face."

The diplomat eyed the woman, who was drinking again. After so long not being able to afford wine, the sight of the liquor being guzzled had his body feeling pangs.

"None of this was meant for you," he finally said.

"Oh, that touch was probably just a drop of arsenic in the wine," Aoede shrugged. "But I *made* your Name, sweetcakes. Back in the days before I knew better."

"Prokopia Lakene was rightfully elected," the Hierarch frowned.

"Right's a pretty broad word, when it comes down to it," the Bard said. "She was silvertongued like you wouldn't believe, true, but that's where I went wrong. The moment the tongue was gone, so was the Name."

"The League survived her," he said.

"The League's skin deep," the Bard said. "None of the forces behind moved any differently after it was formed."

The heroine offered the flask again, and this time Anaxares took it. The liquor within was sweet and tangy, tasting of apples. Much stronger than wine, or anything he'd ever drank before.

"Or it was, anyway," Aoede said. "But now here you are. And you've got a lot of – well, *people* is a bit of stretch but you get my drift – puzzled. Both upstairs and down. So here I am too, welcoming you to the neighbourhood. Instead of fresh bread and a bottle of wine, you get overly personal questions and maybe a dollop of sinister threats. Depending on how it all pans out. Have another pull, diplomat. It's the sweetest thing either of us will taste for a while."

Anaxares did, before handing it back.

"I abstain," he said.

The woman sighed.

"That's not how it works," she told him, as if he were a witless child. "Right now you're sucking at the teat but you're not swallowing. There's always a side picked, Anaxares. Always."

The Bard waved her flask enthusiastically.

"See, that's where you're raising questions," she said. "'cause Kairos forged you, and Kairos is in deep with the folks Below. But you let the White Knight and the Champion go, sparing me a deal that would have been... *costly*. Your people like a bit of sulphur on the altar, it's true, but their idea of worship does little more than keep those in a fresh coat of red. And I'm sorry to say, but you're what we call a mumbler. You speak the words



when the right stars are out but there's no real *meat* to the faith, you get me?"

The Bard leaned closer.

"It's fine if you want to fuck around like a raft on the tide for a while, Hierarch, but keep in mind sooner or later you're going to hit shore," she said.

*That*, Anaxares thought, *or drown*.

"What," he asked patiently, "do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop taking a nap in the middle of the board," the Wandering Bard said. "Stepping around you is already getting tedious, and Kairos is better at it. I don't mind having a few layabouts around, sweetcakes, but only when I *put* them there. You're no work of mine."

Anaxares studied the woman for a long moment then shook his head.

"I do not answer to your Gods," he said. "They drew no lots and hold no appointment."

Something like surprise flickered across the woman's face.

"You're Named," she reminded him.

"I am citizen of the Republic of Bellerophon," he replied.

"You were created with purpose," the Bard said flatly. "Fulfil it."

"This purpose was not voted upon by the People," Anaxares said. "I do not recognize it. Forcing it upon me is unlawful."

"Look, the puppet show in your backwater dump is good for the occasional laugh," Aoede patiently said. "But you've been sent up a rung, Hierarch. That's not the game you're playing anymore."

The Hierarch smiled.

"I know you," he said.

"We've met before," the Wandering Bard agreed warily. "Had tea and everything."

"No," Anaxares said. "I *know* you, old thing. You are the sound of the lash, the deal in the dark. You are the servant of stillness. I deny all you peddle."

"You are mad," the Bard said. "And putting a knife to your own throat. They will *take you apart*."

"If the Heavens seek to impose their will, they will be made to stand before a tribunal of the People," the Hierarch serenely said.

"Your own fucking Gods will bleed you like a pig," the Wandering Bard hissed.

"Then they, too, will be hanged," Anaxares noted. "As honorary citizens of the Republic, they are subject to its laws."

"You—"

"Aoede of Nicae, I charge you with treason," he said, rising to his feet. "Collaboration with foreign oligarchs and agitation in the name of wretched tyrants."

"You can't be *serious*," the Bard said.

"Should you fail to be present at your trial," the Hierarch continued calmly, inexorably, "you will be tried and convicted in absentia. As per League law, you may petition the Basileus of Nicae to request amnesty on your behalf."

He looked down at the woman.

"It will be denied," he told her. "But to petition is your right."

Eyes wide, the Wandering Bard opened her mouth to reply but between two heartbeats' span she... disappeared. As if she had never been there at all.

"This," the Hierarch of the Free Cities said, "will be added to the record as an indication of guilt."

He left the alley, the quarter, the city until he found the boy awaiting him. Kairos Theodosian took one look at him and laughed, his red eye burning.

"Now there," the Tyrant grinned, "is the madman I was waiting for. We are going to have such *fun*, you and I."

—

In the depths of a Hell that had long lost its name and number, a monster opened his eyes. In Keter, a stone that was an old and treasured gift shone red. It had not done this since the days of Dread Empress Triumphant. The Dead King laughed.

"*Finally.*"